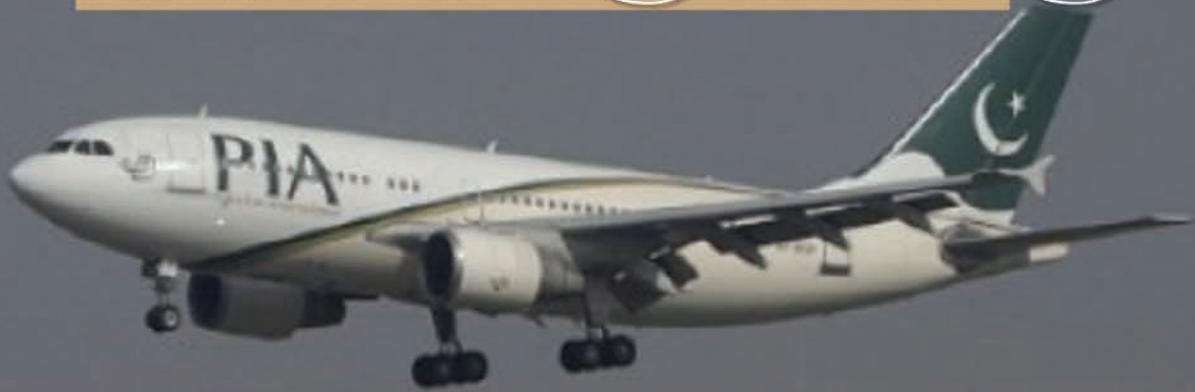


WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL



IMF: A DAMNING REPORT ON CORRUPTION IN PAKISTAN



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About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

Founding Editor

Dr Niloufer Mahdi

Sub-Editor

Rizwan Ahmad

Communication Manager

Usman Riaz

Webmaster

Imran Shoukat

Editorial Office:

Treet Corporation Limited

2-H, Gulberg-II, Lahore

Phone +92-42-35817141-47,

Fax: +92-42-35817138

weeklycuttingedge@gmail.com

editor@weeklycuttingedge.com

info@weeklycuttingedge.com

Printed by Creative Vorks,

Plot# 203, Green Light Street,

Mughal Park, Bund Road, Lahore.

For subscription, please contact

info@weeklycutting.com

IMF: a damning report on corruption in Pakistan

Nasim Ahmed

The International Monetary Fund has published a damning report on corruption in Pakistan, holding the government responsible for the rampant evil. In its recently released Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment (GCDA) report, the IMF has highlighted what has long been known at the public level: that corruption is the bane of Pakistan's economy and a big hurdle to growth. It is corruption which has kept a resource-rich country like Pakistan backward and made it a laggard among its peers in the region and beyond.

The IMF says that the rising corruption trend in Pakistan is driven by weaknesses in the state institutions and demanded immediate implementation of a 15-point reform agenda to improve transparency, fairness and integrity. According to the report, Pakistan could accelerate economic growth by about 5 to 6.5 per cent if it implements the long overdue governance

The IMF report contains some scathing remarks on the country's taxation system which it says is complex and full of loopholes and exemptions. It has identified an overly complex and opaque tax system administered by tax and customs authorities operating with insufficient capacity and parliamentary oversight. No wonder, Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio is low and falling, mainly due to the complexity of the tax system, frequent changes in rules, and low public trust in the government. Neither does the IMF report spare the judicial system which it says cannot enforce contracts or protect property rights due to outdated and antiquated laws, and questionable integrity of judges and judicial officers. What specially fuels corruption is the government's unchecked discretionary power over how public money is spent. Due to this, there are always marked differences between enacted budgets and actual expenses. This is facilitated by lack of public transparency parliamentary engagement in budgetary matters.

end to special privileges given to major public institutions in government contracts. It says that all government procurements should be shifted to an e-governance system as soon as possible, and there should be strict parliamentary checks over all the government's financial powers. The report also urges greater transparency and accountability in policymaking and implementation, including more open access to fiscal information.

These measures are designed to address weaknesses in public sector performance and enhance accountability and the functioning of anti-corruption structures. The overall aim is to strengthen transparency and accountability in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring, improve access to information and strengthen the capacity of state and non-state stakeholders to participate effectively in the governance system and economic decision-making.

Among other things, the IMF has demanded that all public sector procurements should



reforms. Increasing corruption over the years has had a negative impact on public spending effectiveness and revenue collection, and eroded trust in the legal system.

Corruption especially flourishes due to weaknesses in budgeting and reporting of fiscal information, and management of public financial and non-financial resources, particularly in capital spending, public procurement and the management and oversight of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). To quote the report, "Shortly after independence, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, denounced corruption in 1947 as a poison that needed to be eradicated. More than 70 years later, corruption continues to hinder Pakistan's macroeconomic and social development by diverting public funds, distorting markets, impeding fair competition, eroding public trust, and constraining domestic and foreign investment."

According to the IMF, the system is extremely vulnerable to political influence due to which much of public investment is wasted.

According to the IMF, corruption is a highly damaging feature of Pakistan's governance which is manifested by the fact that an average Pakistani is required to pay bribes to government officials for access to services. The root of the evil is that at a higher level policies and practices are shaped and formulated by economic and political elites who cavalierly misuse public authority to enrich themselves at the cost of greater societal good.

After diagnosing the issue, the report suggests short-term as well as long-term structural reforms to improve governance, combat corruption and ensure sustainable growth led by the private sector. The IMF's 15-point reform agenda, above everything else, emphasises accountability of state functionaries and an

eliminate preferences for SOEs, including special provisions for direct contracting. It has urged making public the first annual report of the SIFC, including information on all investments it has facilitated, including special concessions provided to individuals and groups along with detailed explanation and the final outcomes. It said that given its broad and disparate organisational functions and authority, it was essential for the SIFC to develop clear protocols for undertaking its activities and enhanced transparency arrangements to enable effective oversight and accountability. More importantly, it has questioned the SIFC's creation itself and the immunity its staff enjoys in decision-making. It said the council was created by amendment in the Board of Investment law to accelerate investment and privatisation efforts, but the BoI continues to exist. This dichotomy needs to be explained.

Why foreign investment is not coming into Pakistan

Farhan Khan

While the government is focused on accelerating the development process, troubling news on the economic front continues to overshadow its efforts. According to the latest reports, the current account deficit has surged by more than 255 percent year-on-year during the first four months of the current fiscal year. Imports during July–October 2024 amounted to USD 18.9 billion compared to USD 20.7 billion in the corresponding period of 2023 — an increase of nearly 10 percent. During the first four months of FY25, cumulative exports (goods and services) stood at USD 10.42 billion, while in the same period of FY24 exports rose only slightly to USD 10.63 billion.

Consequently, the trade deficit in July–October 2024 stood at a negative USD 8.477 billion compared to the deficit recorded during the same period this year — an increase of 19 percent. Although remittance inflows rose from USD 11,850.9 million in July–October 2024 to USD 12,955.5 million in the same period this year, the current account deficit still widened. Given the shortage of indigenous financial resources, this deficit is being financed through external borrowing — a burden that continues to grow.

The current situation is largely the result of recent policy reversals by the government. Earlier, under IMF pressure, the government adopted contractionary monetary and fiscal measures that sharply increased input costs. This severely affected the productive sector, and industries dependent on imported raw materials and semi-finished goods were deprived of crucial inputs. Responding to these challenges, the government later eased administrative restrictions on the opening of letters of credit. The SBP also lowered the policy rate. These policy shifts, while necessary to revive industrial activity, have contributed to the widening trade deficit.

Adding to the concerns is a steep decline in foreign direct investment during the first four months of FY26. According to the latest State Bank data, FDI dropped 26 percent year-on-year,

falling to USD 747.7 million from USD 1.015 billion previously. This decline stems from falling inflows and rising outflows, resulting in a net reduction of USD 263 million — effectively indicating that foreign firms are repatriating more capital than before.

A similar pattern is evident in portfolio investment. This year saw a net outflow of USD 160 million compared to USD 97 million in the previous year. Foreign public investment has declined even more dramatically, recording a fall of USD 379 million over the period compared to an inflow of USD 283 million last year. Collectively, total foreign investment has plummeted by 82.5 percent to only USD 209.2 million.

All of this reveals a fundamental flaw in Pakistan's external account management

It should deeply worry the country's economic managers that instead of attracting new capital, Pakistan appears to be losing the confidence of existing investors, who are withdrawing funds at an accelerating pace.

The situation calls for immediate and decisive action to reverse the negative trajectory in the external sector. Perhaps buoyed by recent increases in remittances, policymakers overlooked the structural measures required to rebuild investor confidence. But the continuing fall in FDI should serve as a serious warning. It reflects an unhealthy economy and a high level of investor apprehension. The first step must be a thorough assessment of why foreign investment has declined and swift action to remove the obstacles deterring investors. Creating an



strategy. In recent years, the country has grown increasingly dependent on remittances — a source that, though valuable, is inherently unstable and cannot substitute for sustained foreign investment flows, which are non-debt-creating and essential for long-term external stability.

The decline across all foreign investment categories demonstrates that Pakistan's investment climate has deteriorated significantly. The combination of rising capital outflows, falling inflows, and shrinking net foreign investment signals that the incentives and security foreign investors seek are not being adequately provided.

investor-friendly environment requires policy consistency, robust security, and an effective justice system — areas where the current situation remains far from satisfactory.

In an increasingly volatile global economy where external shocks have become routine, Pakistan must strengthen its capacity to withstand disruptions in external financing. Ensuring stable inflows of FDI is crucial in this regard. A well-designed package of incentives — including tax concessions, special economic zones, and free trade areas — could play a meaningful role in attracting sustained foreign investment.

A nation at work—or not?

Muhammad Zain

In a revelation that could reshape perceptions of Pakistan's workforce woes, preliminary data from the latest Labour Force Survey (LFS) for fiscal year 2024-25 indicates that the national unemployment rate has edged up to approximately 7 percent, a notable increase from the 6.3 percent recorded in the 2020-21 survey.

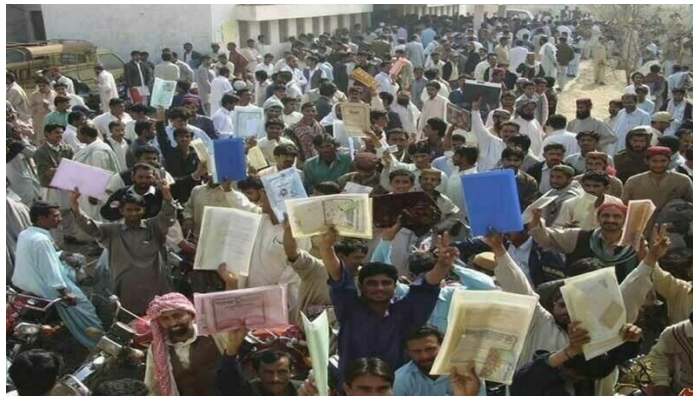
This uptick, shared by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) at the inaugural DataFest conference in October, underscores not just economic pressures but a fundamental shift in how labor statistics are measured, aligning with international benchmarks from the International Labour Organization (ILO). As the government gears up for an official release next week, experts are already debating the nuances—particularly data discrepancies in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)—highlighting the survey's role in unveiling a more precise, if unflattering, portrait of employment realities.

The transition to the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) framework marks a seismic methodological overhaul for Pakistan's LFS, supplanting the outdated 13th ICLS standards that had guided measurements since 1982. Under the old regime, anyone contributing even a single hour of work—be it paid, for profit, or in a family enterprise—was deemed "employed," a broad net that inflated participation figures by encompassing subsistence activities like household farming or unpaid family labor. The 19th ICLS, adopted globally in 2013, refines this by distinguishing "employment work"—tasks performed for pay, profit, or family gain in exchange for goods—as the core metric, while reclassifying non-market endeavors such as growing crops solely for home consumption, raising livestock for personal use, volunteering, or unpaid traineeships as "own-use production work."

This pivot isn't mere semantics; it's a clarion call for accuracy in an era where informal and unpaid labor dominates developing economies. In Pakistan, where agriculture still absorbs over 40 percent of the workforce, the change disproportionately impacts rural women and subsistence farmers—groups long overlooked in market-oriented data. Previously counted as employed, many now slide into "own-use" categories unless they're actively seeking or available for remunerated roles. The ripple effects are predictable: labor force participation dips, employment ratios contract, and unemployment metrics swell, even if the volume of human effort in the economy

remains steady. ILO experts emphasize that this isn't undercounting activity but honing in on "real" market engagement—those pursuits yielding remuneration and driving economic output.

Flash back to the 2020-21 LFS, the last full dataset under the old framework, which painted a somewhat rosier picture amid the COVID-19 fallout. The labor force had ballooned to 71.76 million, with unemployment ticking down slightly to 6.3 percent from prior years. Yet, cracks were evident: the employment-to-population ratio languished at 42.1 percent, revealing a stark gender chasm—64.1 percent for men versus a mere 19.4 percent for women, rooted in cultural barriers, limited education access, and childcare burdens. The



services sector dominated as the top employer, accounting for nearly half of jobs, while youth aged 15-24 bore the brunt with an 11.1 percent unemployment rate—skyrocketing to over 20 percent for young women, fueling brain drain and social unrest.

Fast-forward to FY25, and the new LFS amplifies these vulnerabilities. The 7 percent headline figure, while partly methodological, masks deeper structural frailties exacerbated by post-pandemic recovery lags, climate shocks, and fiscal austerity under the IMF's Extended Fund Facility. With GDP growth projected at a sluggish 2.4 percent for Q3 FY25, job creation has faltered, particularly in manufacturing and agriculture battered by floods and input cost spikes. Rural-to-urban migration surges as small farmers desert unviable plots, swelling informal urban economies where underemployment—unmeasured in basic unemployment stats—plagues 30-40 percent of workers. The gender gap persists, with women's participation potentially dipping further under the refined metrics, as unpaid household chores eclipse paid opportunities.

Critics at DataFest, including labor economists, flagged inconsistencies in ICT employment data, questioning sampling biases in the capital's burgeoning gig and tech

sectors. Queries to PBS's chief statistician remain unanswered, fueling skepticism about the survey's robustness amid Pakistan's history of data opacity. Yet, advocates argue the 19th ICLS upgrade is overdue, enabling better-targeted policies. By isolating market labor, it spotlights true underutilization—time-related (part-timers wanting more hours) and skills mismatches—affecting up to 15 percent of the workforce, per ILO estimates.

The broader canvas is alarming. Pakistan's working-age population, swelling by 2 million annually, demands 3-4 million new jobs yearly to avert a demographic dividend from turning disastrous. Youth unemployment, already a tinderbox at 11 percent, risks igniting unrest if unaddressed, as evidenced by rising emigration—over 335,000 Pakistanis departed in H1 2025 alone. Disparities compound: urban rates hover lower at 5-6 percent, but rural figures could exceed 9 percent post-reclassification, entrenching poverty cycles where 42 percent live below the line.

Policy imperatives loom large. The sharpened LFS data arms planners with tools to prioritize. Vocational training hubs, targeting 5 million youth by 2030, must emphasize digital skills for the services boom. Women's inclusion demands childcare subsidies and anti-harassment laws to boost participation by 10 percentage points. Agricultural reforms—drip irrigation, crop insurance—could reclaim 2 million farm jobs lost to climate vagaries. IMF-aligned fiscal space, with reserves at \$12 billion, offers wiggle room for green job incentives, potentially creating 1 million roles in renewables.

Yet, challenges persist. Informal employment, at 70 percent, evades formal tracking, while gig platforms like Bykea and Careem add precarious gigs unreflected in surveys. Global contrasts sting: India's unemployment dipped to 3.2 percent in 2024 via manufacturing push, while Bangladesh's garment sector absorbed 4 million women. Pakistan must emulate, not envy.

As the official LFS drops next week, it won't just tally jobless numbers; it'll catalyze a reckoning. The 7 percent threshold, born of rigorous standards, demands bold responses: invest in skills, shatter gender ceilings, and forge inclusive growth. Neglect it, and Pakistan's youth—its greatest asset—becomes its gravest liability. With 241 million souls betting on tomorrow's labor market, the stakes couldn't be higher. The survey's lens has cleared; now, policymakers must focus.

When progress bypasses people

Muhammad Hassan

In a nation where gleaming skyscrapers in Lahore contrast starkly with dust-swept villages in Balochistan, the Population Council's newly launched District Vulnerability Index for Pakistan (DVIP) cuts through the rhetoric of progress to reveal a troubling mosaic of neglect.

Unveiled in Islamabad by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and Climate Change Minister Dr. Musadaq Malik, this UK-funded tool—born from three years of rigorous research—dissects vulnerabilities at the granular district level, painting provincial disparities not as unfortunate anomalies but as the deliberate harvest of skewed policies and political favoritism. Unlike narrow climate risk maps that spotlight floods or droughts, the DVIP probes deeper, aggregating 21 indicators across six pivotal domains: housing quality and affordability; communication and transportation networks; livelihood opportunities and economic stability; access to healthcare facilities; public education availability; and demographic pressures like population density and youth bulges. The result is a stark indictment: Pakistan's development dividends have been hoarded in urban Punjab, leaving peripheral regions to fester in systemic exclusion.

The index's revelations are as uncomfortable as they are unequivocal. Of Pakistan's 145 districts, the 20 most vulnerable—home to nearly 10 million people, or 11.3 percent of the population—cluster overwhelmingly in Balochistan, where 17 rank in the highest-risk bracket. Districts like Washuk, Khuzdar, Zhob, Kohlu, Munsakhel, Dera Bugti, Killa Saifullah, Kalat, Jhal Magsi, Nasirabad, Chagai, Barkhan, Harnai, Awaran, Kharan, and Panjgur exemplify this crisis, scoring abysmally across domains. Here, over 40 percent of the province's 13 million residents grapple with substandard housing—mud-brick hovels prone to collapse in Quetta's seismic tremors—coupled with rudimentary roads that isolate communities from markets and medical aid. Unemployment soars above 20 percent in some areas, fueled by arid lands unsuitable for traditional farming and a dearth of industrial hubs. Healthcare access is a lottery: the average resident travels 50 kilometers to the nearest clinic, where facilities often lack basic diagnostics, contributing to maternal mortality rates triple the national average. Education fares worse; school density is a fraction of

Punjab's, with girls' enrollment dipping below 30 percent due to cultural norms and 100-kilometer treks to secondary institutions.

Balochistan's plight isn't episodic—it's engineered. More than half of the DVIP's most at-risk population resides here, including 2 million women of reproductive age and an equal number of under-fives, prime vectors for intergenerational poverty. This marginalization stems from chronic underinvestment: the province, spanning 44 percent of Pakistan's landmass, receives just 9 percent of the national budget, funneled instead to Punjab's breadbasket districts where 13 of the 20 least vulnerable zones thrive. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) offers a comparative lifeline, with only one district—Kohistan—cracking the top five worst, thanks to post-merger reforms and hydropower investments that bolstered livelihoods. Sindh contributes a single vulnerable outlier, while Punjab's southern



and western fringes, like Rajanpur and Dera Ghazi Khan, harbor pockets of deprivation but escape the index's nadir.

These imbalances trace a lineage of governance failures, where centralized authority in Islamabad and provincial capitals like Lahore has weaponized resource allocation for electoral gain. Short-term cycles prioritize ribbon-cutting in swing constituencies, sidelining Balochistan's nomadic herders and fisherfolk who lack voting clout in federal corridors. The fallout? A vulnerability vortex where poor infrastructure amplifies climate shocks—2022 floods submerged 80 percent of Balochistan's crops, displacing 500,000 without resilient backups. Demographic strains compound this: Balochistan's fertility rate of 3.5 births per woman outpaces Punjab's 2.8, swelling youth cohorts without commensurate job pipelines, edging unemployment toward 15 percent province-wide.

The DVIP's launch, hosted by the Population Council in partnership with the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Develop-

ment Office, elicited rare candor from leaders. Finance Minister Aurangzeb, lauding the index as a "powerful lens," tied Pakistan's macroeconomic stabilization—reserves at \$12 billion, inflation at 4 percent—to untapped demographic and climate imperatives.

Yet, data alone won't dismantle dynasties of disparity. The index indicts a patronage-driven model where public investments—Rs8 trillion in the FY26 budget—cluster in Punjab's motorways and Sindh's ports, while Balochistan's Gwadar languishes in unrealized promise despite CPEC fanfare. Even with the 7th NFC Award boosting provincial shares to 57 percent, trickle-down to districts remains throttled by elite capture in Quetta and Peshawar. Systemic rot persists: corruption siphons 20 percent of development funds, per Transparency International, eroding trust in a province where insurgency flares from perceived inequities.

Revitalization demands a federal pivot. First, decentralize fiscal flows: empower district councils with 30 percent of provincial allocations, tied to DVIP metrics for performance audits. Pilot in Balochistan with Rs100 billion for solar-microgrids in off-grid hamlets, slashing energy poverty by 50 percent and igniting agro-processing jobs. Second, fortify human capital: deploy mobile health vans and e-learning kiosks to bridge access gaps, targeting a 20 percent enrollment surge for girls via conditional cash transfers modeled on Punjab's successes. Climate-proofing is non-negotiable: integrate DVIP into the National Adaptation Plan, channeling \$2 billion in green bonds for drought-resistant crops and flood barriers in the Indus basin's fringes.

The DVIP's dual verdict resonates profoundly: Pakistan's hurdles aren't fiscal scarcity—GDP per capita edges \$1,600 amid \$400 billion remittances—but maldistribution that exposes the vulnerable to amplified perils. Those in Zhob or Awaran, already rationing water and schooling, face compounded ruin from monsoons that Punjab's canals deflect. Without redress, this chasm widens, breeding resentment that undermines national cohesion.

The index isn't mere cartography; it's a moral compass, demanding leaders transcend electoral myopia for a federated future. Balochistan's margins aren't destiny—they're a policy choice. Rechoose wisely, or watch the republic's seams unravel under vulnerability's unrelenting strain.

IMF's stark diagnosis of Pakistan

Shahid Hussain

In a scathing indictment that lays bare the rot at the heart of Pakistan's institutions, the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment (GCDA) report paints a damning picture of systemic graft and governance lapses strangling the nation's economic aspirations.

Conducted at the behest of Islamabad and spanning federal functions since January, this long-delayed document—now a linchpin for unlocking the next \$1.2 billion tranche under the \$7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF)—exposes how opacity, elite favoritism, and institutional inertia have conspired to hobble growth, deter investment, and perpetuate inequality.

The report's release, after months of foot-dragging by the government amid IMF prodding, arrives at a pivotal juncture. With inflation tamed to single digits and reserves swelling past \$12 billion, Pakistan teeters on the cusp of recovery. Yet, the report warns that without dismantling entrenched corrupt practices, this fragile stability risks unraveling. "Persistent corruption and elite capture are undermining Pakistan's economic growth," it declares, linking discretionary powers in tax administration, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and judicial enforcement to a vicious cycle of inefficiency and lost potential. The diagnostic scrutinizes five core state pillars—fiscal governance, market regulation, financial oversight, anti-money laundering, and SOE management—uncovering a web of vulnerabilities that inflate costs, erode trust, and shield the powerful from accountability.

At the epicenter lies Pakistan's notoriously opaque tax regime, where evasion thrives amid weak enforcement and political meddling. The FBR's tax-to-GDP ratio, a measly 10.3 percent in FY25, lags far behind regional peers, starved by exemptions for influential lobbies and under-resourced audits. SOEs, bleeding Rs500 billion annually in losses, exemplify mismanagement: politically appointed boards dole out patronage jobs, while procurement scandals—like the Pakistan Steel Mills' ghost contracts—siphon billions. The judiciary fares no better, bogged down by archaic colonial-era laws that delay contract resolutions to over 1,000 days, deterring foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, which slumped to \$1.3 billion last year.

The report zeroes in on flashpoints like the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a civilian-military hybrid touted for streamlining FDI but criticized for its veil of secrecy. The report questions the blanket immunity shielding SIFC officials from scrutiny, alongside opaque concessions granted to select

conglomerates in mining and energy—deals that bypass parliamentary oversight and fuel perceptions of cronyism. Financial discretion, wielded through ad-hoc bailouts and subsidized loans to favored sectors, further distorts markets. Anti-corruption bodies, including the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), are lambasted for selective prosecutions that target political foes while sparing entrenched elites, rendering them tools of vendetta rather than justice.

This governance quagmire, the IMF argues, isn't peripheral—it's foundational to Pakistan's economic malaise. Discretionary practices inflate the cost of doing business by 20-30 percent, per World Bank estimates, while corruption siphons 2-3 percent of GDP annually—equivalent to \$10 billion lost to leakages. The result? A growth trajectory capped at 2-3 percent, far short of the 5-6.5 percent needed to absorb 2 million annual labor market entrants and halve poverty from 42 percent. Investor confidence evaporates: credit ratings linger at CCC+, and FDI as a GDP share hovers at a dismal 0.7 percent, compared to India's 2 percent.



The report's clarion call: pivot to rules-based governance anchored in transparency. "Expanding access to information is essential to foster accountability and enable participatory decision-making," it posits, urging open data portals for budgets, procurement, and SOE performance. This isn't abstract idealism; it's pragmatic economics. Transparent systems, as seen in Estonia's e-governance model, can slash administrative costs by 15 percent and boost private sector dynamism. In Pakistan, where 70 percent of transactions remain cash-based and untraceable, digitization could unearth Rs2 trillion in hidden revenues.

Complementing the diagnosis is a 15-point reform blueprint, a roadmap for the next three to six months to catalyze medium-term growth. Prioritizing anti-corruption bulwarks, it mandates restructuring NAB into an independent, evidence-driven entity with prosecutorial autonomy, insulated from executive whims. Business regulations get an overhaul: streamline licensing via single-window portals, enforce merit-based contract awards, and cap discretionary exemptions.

For foreign trade, it calls for digitized customs with AI-driven risk profiling to curb smuggling, which drains \$5 billion yearly.

Fiscal transparency takes center stage—parliamentary committees to vet SOE bailouts, mandatory public disclosure of SIFC incentives, and e-procurement platforms to end backroom deals. Judicial reforms target bottlenecks: modernize laws for swift property rights enforcement and commercial dispute resolution, aiming to halve case backlogs within two years. Anti-money laundering gets teeth through enhanced Financial Monitoring Unit powers and international asset recovery pacts.

These aren't radical overhauls but targeted strikes at discretion's roots. Ending preferential treatments for public entities—such as energy tariff rebates for textile barons—levels the playing field, potentially unlocking \$3-4 billion in annual FDI. Tighter financial oversight, via independent audits of central bank interventions, curbs moral hazard. The IMF dangles a carrot: faithful implementation could propel GDP growth to 6.5 percent by FY30, creating 10 million jobs and lifting 20 million from poverty.

Yet, the report's optimism is tempered by skepticism. Pakistan's power brokers—spanning bureaucracy, military, and business oligarchs—thrive on the status quo. Delaying the report's release, despite IMF deadlines tied to the December tranche, betrays reluctance to expose vulnerabilities. Political patronage, where MPs secure exemptions for kin's firms, and elite capture—top 1 percent holding 20 percent of wealth—resist erosion. Civil society, though vocal via platforms like the Transparency International chapter, lacks enforcement muscle.

The jury, indeed, remains out. Will Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's coalition muster the political capital? Early signals are mixed: Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb hailed the report as a "blueprint for transformation" in a briefing, pledging pilot e-procurement in Punjab by Q1 2026. Yet, without buy-in from the establishment, reforms risk becoming another shelf document.

Pakistan's crossroads is stark: cling to opacity, and stagnation beckons—youth bulge turning to unrest, remittances (\$35 billion life-line) faltering amid global slowdowns. Embrace change, and the GCDA's vision materializes: a transparent state fueling inclusive growth. As the December board meeting looms, the onus falls on leaders to transcend privileges for the collective good. Time, as the report laments, is "fast running out" for make-or-break choices. The people, enduring 22 percent youth unemployment and 40 percent multidimensional poverty, deserve no less than bold, unwavering action.

Why next amendment must drive structural reform—not political consolidation

Raza Khan

Former federal minister and a key figure within the ruling coalition party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Rana Sanaullah, has recently disclosed that following the successful passage of the 27th Constitutional Amendment, the 28th Amendment is now also on the horizon and may soon be introduced in parliament. Although Sanaullah—along with other senior officials—has yet to clearly articulate the specific focus of the upcoming amendment, journalists and political analysts widely argue that it is likely to revolve around extensive administrative and financial restructuring in the country.

These potential reforms may include revisiting the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, which outlines the vertical distribution of financial resources between the federation and the provinces, as well as the horizontal distribution among the four federating units. The speculated amendment is also expected to propose the formation of new, more viable administrative units through an increase in the number of provinces. Additionally, it may aim to shift key ministries such as education, health, and population control from provincial authorities back to the Centre.

Regardless of whether the 28th Amendment is eventually tabled, debated, or passed with consensus among coalition partners, one fact remains indisputable: Pakistan urgently requires sweeping political, administrative, and fiscal reforms. Only such comprehensive transformations can address the country's increasingly dysfunctional governance apparatus, which continues to aggravate the lived hardships of ordinary citizens while deepening complex internal conflicts and national crises.

This urgency is underscored by persistent separatist insurgencies in two critical regions—Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). In Balochistan, the insurgency is spearheaded by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and its affiliated Majeed Brigade, which the state has labelled as Fitna-tul-Hindustan due to alleged external backing. In KP, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), branded by the state as Fita-ul-Khwarij, continues to destabilize the region. Beyond militancy, Pakistan faces political instability,

soaring poverty, alarming inflation, capital flight, and virtually nonexistent foreign investment. Above all, social cohesion has weakened, with conflicts emerging within almost every segment of society and across its institutional structures. In such circumstances, the state must respond with unwavering resolve and a firm commitment to far-reaching reforms aimed at preserving national stability and societal unity. Yet, these reforms must not serve as mere instruments for entrenching the power of the existing elite—a historic mistake that has repeatedly contributed to today's severe crises.

Turning to the nature and scope of the political, administrative, and financial restructuring required, it becomes evident that the task is multidimensional. Perhaps the most critical question Pakistan must confront is the choice of a governance system capable of overcoming the widespread conflict and institutional breakdown now entrenched at nearly every level of society and state. A candid assessment of Pakistan's realities demands

to narrow personal and factional interests.

Another essential component of meaningful political and administrative restructuring is the creation of smaller, more efficient, and administratively functional provincial units. Given Pakistan's exponential population growth and the multiplication of citizen grievances, the existing four-province structure has become increasingly inadequate. At independence in 1947, Pakistan consisted of three provinces, with Balochistan attaining full provincial status only in 1970. Since then, the demographic burden and complexity of governance have far outpaced the capacity of these provinces to deliver reliable public services. This became particularly evident after the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, which devolved numerous subjects from the federal Concurrent List to provincial governments. The provinces have struggled to manage these expanded responsibilities, highlighting structural weaknesses in governance and policymaking.

Strengthening local government (LG) systems is another indispensable aspect of national restructuring. Although LG bodies have existed in various forms across the provinces, they have largely failed to deliver meaningful services or resolve grassroots issues due to the provinces' reluctance to devolve real administrative, legal, and financial authority. As a result, the country now faces an administrative labyrinth—numerous departments and officials but little actual relief for the public. In this context, creating additional

provinces has become increasingly necessary. Smaller, more manageable federating units would enhance provincial capacity, streamline administration, and allow local governments to finally function as intended.

However, new provinces must not be carved along purely ethnic or linguistic lines. While ethnic identity currently motivates much of the demand for new provinces, such divisions would undermine federal cohesion and administrative efficiency. True restructuring must prioritize functional governance, not identity politics. The ongoing integration of the former FATA region into KP, efforts to establish South Punjab, and the push for a definitive administrative status for Gilgit-Baltistan all represent steps in this direction, but these efforts will remain incomplete.



acknowledging that the current parliamentary system has repeatedly fallen short in addressing the country's complex challenges. Consequently, significant voices have emerged advocating for a presidential model akin to that of the United States—a country whose stable institutions and robust separation of powers enabled it to evolve into an unparalleled economic, political, and military power over the past 125 years. By the early 20th century, the United States had already begun constructing a formidable naval force, and by World War II it had become unrivaled, a rise made possible by a century of federal stability, administratively competent states, and sustained industrial growth. In Pakistan, however, powerful political actors have historically resisted a strong presidential system, largely due

Cotton to cane: How sugar barons hijacked Pakistan's agricultural future

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Over the last three decades, Pakistan's agricultural heartland has undergone a seismic shift, one that prioritizes short-term gains over long-term viability. Once the cradle of a thriving cotton economy that fueled exports and millions of jobs, regions like Rahim Yar Khan in southern Punjab are now succumbing to the relentless advance of sugarcane—a water-thirsty behemoth propped up by powerful lobbies and lax regulations.

This transformation isn't organic; it's the result of deliberate policy distortions, where crop-zoning violations and a boom in sugar mills have eclipsed staple crops, jeopardizing food security, industrial growth, and environmental health. As cotton acreage shrinks and textile mills shutter, the nation grapples with a crisis that threatens to unravel its economic fabric.

Rahim Yar Khan, historically Pakistan's crown jewel for cotton production, exemplifies this agrarian upheaval. In its heyday, the district spanned 800,000 acres under cotton, yielding 1.3 to 1.4 million bales annually and anchoring the Bahawalpur division's output at over 4 million bales. Today, that legacy is fading fast. Sugarcane has invaded these fertile plains, driven by the proliferation of six major sugar mills boasting a combined crushing capacity of 135,000 tonnes per day—nearly 40 percent of the country's total milling power. One mill is slated for a 10,000-tonne daily expansion this season, while two industrial conglomerates, rebuffed for local permits, have erected new facilities across the Punjab-Sindh border with capacities of 16,000 and 19,000 tonnes per day. This concentration isn't just logistical; it's a stranglehold that funnels water and land toward sugar, sidelining cotton and inflating Pakistan's import dependencies.

The numbers tell a tale of displacement. National cotton production has cratered 34 percent this year, with arrivals plunging 32.64 percent in the 2025-26 season—nowhere more dramatically than in Rahim Yar Khan, where ginning volumes nosedived 99.35 percent from 2,310 bales last year to a mere 15. Overall acreage has withered from 2.96 million hectares to 1.97 million, as farmers pivot to sugarcane's allure: assured mill contracts and higher per-acre returns, often 20-30 percent above cotton amid volatile global prices. Sugarcane's ratoon system exacerbates the lock-in; after the initial harvest, stalks regrow for one or two more cycles without replanting, tying up prime irrigated land for up to three years. This multi-year monopoly crowds out wheat, pulses, and oilseeds, forcing imports that ballooned the food bill by 15 percent last fiscal year.

At the epicenter of this reconfiguration are the sugar barons—politically entrenched tycoons whose mills dominate 90 facilities nationwide, split evenly between Punjab and Sindh. Their clout has eroded crop-zoning laws, once mandating mills source cane from designated zones to balance regional cultivation. Now phased out, these rules have unleashed a free-for-all, with sugarcane acreage surging 4.8 percent to 856,000 hectares in Punjab alone for 2025-26, yielding 61.73 million tons—a 2.7 percent uptick despite national water woes. Over 80 percent of output feeds industrial behemoths like beverages and confectionery, ensuring captive demand that drowns out broader economic signals. In Rahim Yar Khan, this has flipped the script: the district now churns out 17.5 million tons of cane annually—20 percent of national production—eclipsing even Sindh's total.

The ripple effects cascade through Paki-



stan's economy like a dominoes' fall. Textiles, the lifeblood of exports contributing over half of foreign exchange earnings, are gasping for raw material. The All Pakistan Textile Mills Association (APTMA) reports 150 mills shuttered nationwide in the past two years, with over 100 spinning units—40 percent of capacity—idled by January 2025 alone. High energy costs, tax anomalies in the Export Facilitation Scheme, and yarn imports tripling to record highs have compounded the cotton crunch, pushing operations below 50 percent utilization. In Punjab's textile epicenters like Faisalabad and Multan, 187 units have closed since late 2024, axing thousands of jobs and slashing exports by an estimated \$2 billion. Even giants like Gul Ahmed have culled export apparel segments, citing commoditized margins and unviable costs. Without intervention, APTMA warns, the entire value chain—from ginning factories to garment stitching—faces obliteration, diverting billions in investments abroad and eroding rural livelihoods tied to cotton picking.

Environmental tolls amplify the folly. Sugarcane guzzles 1,500-2,000 millimeters of water per hectare—double cotton's needs—exacerbating scarcity in the Indus Basin, where groundwater tables rise perilously, salinizing

soils and turning arable tracts into barren salinas. In Rahim Yar Khan, excessive irrigation has depleted millions of acre-feet, fostering salinity that slashes yields by 20-30 percent over time and erodes biodiversity. Soil health deteriorates too: ratooning depletes nutrients, demanding heavy fertilizers that pollute waterways and spike effluent from mills, with biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) levels from sugar processing contaminating groundwater and rivers. Climate change compounds this: erratic monsoons and heatwaves, projected to cut sugarcane yields 10-15 percent by 2030, strain already overtaxed aquifers. The 2022 floods, which ravaged 80 percent of Balochistan's crops, underscore how such imbalances leave systems brittle, with staples like wheat displaced and food inflation hovering at 12 percent.

This isn't mere market whim; it's policy capture. Sugar lobbies, intertwined with political dynasties in Punjab and Sindh, have lobbied for deregulation under IMF mandates, withdrawing support prices in 2025 and unleashing market volatility on farmers. Yet, while cane output climbs to 83.5 million tons for 2025-26—a 4 percent rise—national sugar production eyes 6.6 million tons, 13 percent above prior estimates, at the expense of equity. Smallholders, locked into mill contracts, forgo diversification, perpetuating a cycle where 93 percent of cane hails from Punjab and Sindh, marginalizing other provinces.

Revival demands a reckoning. First, reinstate and enforce crop-zoning with incentives for cotton—subsidized seeds, drip irrigation rebates, and minimum support prices 15-20 percent above market to match sugarcane's pull. Second, cap mill expansions in cotton belts, redirecting investments to arid zones via geospatial mapping. Water stewardship is non-negotiable: promote precision agriculture like trash mulching, which boosts efficiency 20 percent and conserves soil moisture. Third, fortify textiles through zero-rating local inputs under EFS, slashing energy tariffs to 8 cents per unit to rival India, and fostering farmer cooperatives for bargaining power.

Pakistan's agricultural crossroads is dire: sugarcane's shadow risks eclipsing a \$15-16 billion textile export horizon for FY25. Dismantling elite entrenchment—via antitrust probes and transparent procurement—could reclaim 500,000 acres for cotton, generating 2 million jobs and slashing imports by \$1 billion annually. The status quo is a slow poison, depleting aquifers, eroding soils, and hollowing industries. Policymakers must choose: sustain a cabal's feast or harvest a balanced bounty. The fields of Rahim Yar Khan, once white with cotton's promise, await that verdict.

Workplaces or graveyards?

Dr. Fatima Khan

In the shadowed underbelly of Pakistan's booming textile hubs and makeshift workshops, the line between livelihood and lethality blurs with terrifying ease. The past week has etched two more grim chapters into this ledger of loss: a catastrophic gas explosion at a glue factory in Faisalabad that claimed at least 20 lives, including entire families in neighboring homes, and a fireworks blast in Hyderabad that obliterated an illegal unit, killing 10 and leaving survivors scarred by flames and debris. These aren't freak anomalies but stark symptoms of a systemic affliction—where safety protocols gather dust, inspections are performative charades, and the human cost of production is tallied only in post-mortem headlines. As rescuers sift through rubble still warm with tragedy, the question echoes louder than the blasts themselves: how many more must perish before the state enforces the sanctity of a worker's right to return home alive? Dawn broke too late for the victims in Faisalabad's Malikpur industrial zone on November 21, when a pre-dawn gas leak ignited a fireball that vaporized a glue-manufacturing unit and cascaded into adjacent structures. The explosion, preliminarily traced to a faulty chemical warehouse, sheared off roofs from four factories and nine homes in Shahab Town, trapping laborers and residents alike under tons of twisted metal and concrete. Rescue teams, bolstered by over 20 ambulances and fire tenders, toiled for hours amid acrid smoke, pulling out bodies mangled beyond immediate recognition—prompting DNA tests to reunite fragments with families. Among the dead: Shafiq, 62, his wife Maqsooda, 55, and five grandchildren aged 4 to 13; electrical engineer Ashiq Hussain and his three sons in their twenties; and siblings Waqas and Saim, embroidery workers felled in a neighboring unit. Seven survivors, including children with severe burns, languish in hospitals, their futures shadowed by medical bills and trauma.

Initial reports muddled the trigger—boiler malfunction or gas buildup?—but the FIR paints a damning portrait of forewarned folly: residents had pleaded with management to relocate flammable chemicals, ignored in pursuit of profit. The factory owner faces charges under the Anti-Terrorism Act, Penal Code, and Explosives Substances Act, while the manager sits in custody; the proprietor remains fugitive. Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif ordered swift medical aid and an inquiry, but such directives ring hollow against the chorus of similar vows unkept.

Barely a week earlier, on November 15, Hyderabad's Latifabad neighborhood shuddered under a detonation that leveled a fireworks

factory masquerading as a residence in Leghari Goth. The blast, audible kilometers away, reduced the structure to smoldering ruins, its tunnel-like hideaway for explosives betraying a licensed operation at another site. Six died instantly—workers like Waseem, 23, and unidentified souls yet to be claimed—while eight others, five in critical condition, battled burns at Liaquat University Hospital's unit. By November 17, the toll climbed to 10, including owner Asad Zai, confirmed via DNA amid ongoing rubble clearance. Rescue 1122 teams unearthed debris from a collapsed room and boundary wall, where children and laborers had toiled in secrecy.

Sindh Home Minister Ziaul Hassan Lanjar decried the illegality, vowing probes into licensing lapses and safety adherence, yet the response—sealing rogue units and shifting LPG outlets district-wide—arrived postmortem, a reactive ritual all too ingrained. Mayor Kashif Shoro visited the injured, but whispers of political patronage shielding such ventures persist, echoing Faisalabad's ignored warnings.

These eruptions of violence aren't isolated; they're the volatile exhaust of a regulatory vacuum. Pakistan's industrial landscape, fueling 13 percent of GDP through textiles and small-scale manufacturing, claims lives with alarming regularity. In 2024 alone, boiler blasts and fires felled dozens: a Sargodha textile mill inferno injured 12, with fatalities mounting from burns; a Karachi firecracker warehouse explosion killed four and maimed 11; and Faisalabad logged 20 such incidents from 2019-2024, per Rescue 1122, slaying 13 and wounding 20 more. Extrapolate to 2025: the Faisalabad and Hyderabad tolls push yearly deaths past 50, underscoring a peril where outdated machinery, congested sites, and absent fire exits are norms, not exceptions.

This pattern's prologue is etched in the 2012 Baldia Town conflagration, where a short-circuit ignited locked-door hell at Ali Enterprises, incinerating 258 garment workers—mostly women and children—in Karachi's deadliest industrial blaze. Doors barred to thwart "theft," windows gridded like cages, no hydrants or escapes: a tribunal later pinned it on owners' greed and inspectors' blindness, yet reforms sputtered. The Factories Act of 1934, colonial relic mandating fire precautions and machinery safeguards, languishes unenforced; child labor and unpaid overtime thrive unchecked. International suits against auditors like Italy's RINA for sham certifications yielded ILO-brokered compensations in 2018, but systemic overhaul? A mirage. Labor departments, starved of staff and sway, conduct sporadic checks; informal units in residential mazes evade scrutiny altogether.

The anatomy of neglect is multifaceted. Economic desperation drives workers—often

migrants from rural wastelands—into these tinderboxes for meager wages, silenced by job scarcity. Owners, emboldened by lax zoning and bribe-riddled permits, prioritize output over oxygen masks or sprinklers. Political undercurrents compound: in Sindh and Punjab, industrial lobbies wield electoral clout, diluting penalties to slaps on wrists. Climate's cruel irony amplifies risks—erratic power surges strain boilers, while floods corrode infrastructure uninspected.

Global contrasts indict further. Bangladesh, post-2013 Rana Plaza collapse (1,134 dead), birthed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, mandating audits and renovations that halved factory fatalities. Pakistan's garment exporters, eyeing EU markets, tout SA8000 compliance, yet Baldia's ghost lingers in falsified reports.

The antidote demands resolve beyond rhetoric. A unified Occupational Safety and Health Act, harmonizing provincial silos under federal oversight, must criminalize violations with jail terms and factory seizures—not fines that barely dent ledgers. High-risk sectors—textiles, chemicals, pyrotechnics—require annual third-party audits by certified firms, subsidized for small operators but non-negotiable. Unannounced inspections, empowered by a beefed-up, digitized labor inspectorate (target: 5,000 officers nationwide), should trigger immediate shutdowns for code breaches.

Relocation edicts for hazardous units to buffered industrial parks, like Sialkot's model, could shield civilians; incentives via tax rebates for compliant firms might lure investment. Worker empowerment is pivotal: union rights fortified against reprisals, mandatory safety committees in every unit, and a national fund—seeded by exporter levies—for victim compensations exceeding the paltry Rs1-2 million cheques. Tech's trove: IoT sensors for real-time hazard alerts, blockchain for transparent audits.

Yet, blueprints falter without backbone. The IMF's governance diagnostic, urging anti-corruption teeth, ties loans to such reforms—Pakistan's \$7 billion lifeline hinges on delivery. Civil society, from the Baldia survivors' coalitions to unions like NTUF, must amplify demands; international buyers, pressuring via supply-chain pacts, hold leverage.

In Faisalabad's ruins and Hyderabad's ashes, the dead whisper indictments: safety isn't a luxury—it's sovereignty over one's labor. Until the state equates a worker's breath with a balance sheet's black ink, these infernos will recur, each a pyre for the forgotten. The pattern persists because negligence pays; breaking it demands that lives, not inquiries, dictate the narrative. Pakistan's industries can thrive without devouring its people—but only if leaders summon the will to mandate it.

No, there is no ceasefire in Gaza

Yara Hawari

When on October 10, a “ceasefire” was declared in Gaza, many Palestinians breathed a sigh of relief. They had just endured two years of constant bombardment estimated to equal roughly six times the explosive force of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, concentrated on an area less than half the size of the Japanese city.

The devastation was all encompassing. All hospitals and universities had been bombed, most homes and schools destroyed and vital infrastructure, such as the sewage system and electricity lines, had been damaged beyond repair. An estimated 50 million tonnes of rubble was strewn across the strip and under it lay at least 10,000 bodies of Palestinians killed in bombardments who were yet to be recovered.

And yet, the respite the people of Gaza expected to finally come never materialised. Almost immediately after the “ceasefire” announcement, the Israeli regime started bombing the strip again. It hasn't stopped since then. According to Gaza's Government Media Office, Israel has violated the “ceasefire” nearly 500 times in 44 days, killing 342 civilians. The deadliest day was on October 29 when the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) killed 109 Palestinians, including 52 children. More recently, on Thursday, 32 Palestinians were killed, including an entire family in the Zeitoun neighbourhood of Gaza City when a bomb was dropped on a building they were sheltering in.

But it is not just the bombardment that hasn't stopped. The starvation hasn't either. As per the “ceasefire” agreement, 600 trucks of aid were supposed to be allowed in every day, which Israel has not fulfilled. As Al Jazeera's correspondent Hind al-Khoudary has reported from Gaza, the IOF is permitting only 150 trucks a day to cross into the strip. They are also preventing the entry of nutritious foods, including meat, dairy and vegetables, as well as much-needed medicine, tents and other materials for shelter.

A coalition of Palestinian relief agencies estimated that the aid that enters now doesn't even cover a quarter of the basic needs of the

population. The United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), which says it has enough food in its warehouses to feed everyone in Gaza for months, is still not allowed to bring in any of it. This is in direct contravention of an October advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that the Israeli regime has a duty to not impede the supply of aid by UN agencies, including UNRWA.

The court also rejected Israeli accusations that the agency lacks neutrality and asserted that it is an indispensable actor in the humanitarian landscape. Nonetheless, the Israeli regime has rejected the advisory opinion and continues to limit UNRWA activities by preventing aid distribution and denying visas to its international staff. The Israeli regime is also not abiding by the provisional measures that were

Trump's 20-point plan for Gaza.

Among its provisions is the creation of two bodies that would take control of Gaza: the board of peace, chaired by Trump himself, and the international stabilisation force, tasked with maintaining security and enforcing the disarmament of Palestinian groups. The governing structure of both bodies remains unclear, but they would operate in coordination with the Israeli regime, effectively installing another layer of foreign control over the Palestinian people.

The resolution also allows for the bypassing of existing local and international structures in the distribution of aid. It makes no mention of the genocide and does not propose any mechanism for accountability for war crimes. Essentially, the resolution contravenes international law and gives the US – a co-perpetrator of genocide



laid out in an ICJ ruling in January 2024 that found that plausible acts of genocide were being committed in Gaza. These measures included preventing acts of genocide, preventing and punishing incitement to genocide and allowing humanitarian assistance into Gaza. Since then, the court has reaffirmed its provisional measures several times. The Israeli regime continues to ignore them.

And that is because on the international level, it continues to enjoy unprecedented diplomatic, financial and military cover. The latest iteration of that came on November 17 when the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2803, endorsing United States President Donald

– control over Gaza.

All of this makes clear the fact that the “ceasefire” is not a ceasefire at all. The Israeli regime continues to attack Gaza, to starve the Palestinian population and to deny it access to proper shelter and healthcare.

Calling this arrangement a ceasefire allows third states to claim progress on conflict resolution and even peace when the core genocidal reality of the Palestinians on the ground remains largely unchanged. The “ceasefire” is a diplomatic sham – a cover for the continuing extermination, displacement and erasure of the Palestinian people in Gaza and a distraction for the international public and the media.

Venezuela: A not-so-covert CIA disaster in the making

Belén Fernández

The Reuters news agency published an exclusive report claiming that the United States is “poised to launch a new phase of Venezuela-related operations in the coming days”. The report cited four US officials who spoke on condition of anonymity. Two of the officials said covert operations would likely be the first step in this “new action” against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

This was less than shocking news given that more than a month ago, US President Donald Trump himself announced that he had authorised the CIA to conduct covert operations in Venezuela – a rather unique approach since one does not normally broadcast actions that are supposed to be, um, secret.

Anyway, it’s no secret that the US has been overseeing a massive military build-up in the region with about 15,000 US troops currently stationed there under the guise of fighting “narcoterrorism”. Since early September, Trump has also presided over wanton extrajudicial executions in the Caribbean Sea, repeatedly ordering the bombing of what he claims are drug-trafficking boats.

In addition to violating both international and US law, the strikes have produced little to show for themselves beyond terrorising local fishermen. To be sure, the US has never met a “war on drugs” it didn’t love, given the convenient opportunities the whole drug-war narrative offers for wreaking havoc worldwide, militarising the Western Hemisphere, criminalising poor Americans and all sorts of other good stuff.

Never mind that US financial institutions have for decades reaped profits from the international drug trade – or that “The CIA Drug Connection Is as Old as the Agency,” as an article on The New York Times website puts it.

It should come as no surprise by now that the president who campaigned on keeping the US out of wars and then promptly bombed Iran has now found another conflict in which to embroil the country. And as is par for the course in US imperial belligerence, the rationale for aggression against Venezuela doesn’t hold water.

For example, the Trump administration has strived to pin the blame for the fentanyl crisis in the US on Maduro. But there’s a slight problem – which is that Venezuela doesn’t even

produce the synthetic opioid in question. As NBC News and other hardly radical outlets have pointed out, Venezuelan drug cartels are focused on exporting cocaine to Europe, not fentanyl to the US.

Nevertheless, on November 13, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth – pardon, US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, as per administrative rebranding – took to X to assure his audience that the massive US military build-up off the Venezuelan coast is a mission that “defends our Homeland, removes narco-terrorists from our Hemisphere, and secures our Homeland from the drugs that are killing our people”.

This is the same administration, of course, that was just threatening to starve impoverished

Like his predecessor Hugo Chavez, Maduro has long been a thorn in the side of the US empire – hence the current campaign to discredit him as a “narcoterrorist” and thereby set the stage for regime change. He also happens to be a pet target of Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is seen as the main architect of Washington’s war plans in Venezuela. Potentially eyeing a presidential bid in three years, Rubio is seeking to curry favour with his Florida constituency, which includes fanatically right-wing members of the Venezuelan and Cuban diasporas.

According to the Reuters report on impending “Venezuela-related operations”, two of the US officials consulted told the news agency that “the options under consideration included



Americans by withholding essential food assistance, which suggests that the wellbeing of “our people” isn’t really of utmost concern. Consider also the fact that Trump slashed federal funding for gun violence prevention programmes in a country where mass shootings have become a way of life. Obviously, massacres in elementary schools are “killing our people” in a way that has nothing whatsoever to do with Venezuela.

But it’s so much more fun to blame Maduro for everything, right? Poverty itself is a major killer in America – as is the domestic pharmaceutical industry (speaking of opioids). However, none of these full-blown crises has merited a remotely gung-ho response from the valiant defenders of the Homeland.

attempting to overthrow Maduro”. If the plans succeeds, Rubio would join the lengthy roster of US politicians who have propagated deadly havoc abroad in the interest of political gains at home.

Meanwhile, The Washington Post reported that the White House had “proposed an idea for US military planes to drop leaflets over Caracas in a psychological operation” to pressure Maduro.

Sounds like a page – or a leaflet – out of the old Israeli military playbook. And as the Trump administration barrels on with its not-so-covert plans for Venezuela, such hemispheric recklessness will secure neither the US homeland nor anyone else’s.

Why strengthening oilseed sector is key to Pakistan's food security

Pakistan's economy is deeply rooted in agriculture — a sector that is vital to our national growth, food security and rural livelihoods. Over the years, the critical sector has suffered from climate change, recurrent floods and inconsistent government policies. As a result, the country now relies heavily on imported food commodities, spending nearly \$10 billion annually, half of which goes towards importing edible oil and oilseeds. This dependence is not alarming alone; it is unsustainable.

In the 1970s, Pakistan took an important step by establishing the Ghee Corporation of Pakistan (GCP) to promote local oilseed crops. Later, the World Bank-funded National Oilseed Development Project (NODP) was launched. These initiatives laid the groundwork for a self-reliant edible oil sector. Recognising the overlap between GCP and NODP, the Pakistan Oilseed Development Board (PODB) was created in 1994 to consolidate efforts in oilseed promotion, research and industry linkages.

Reviving the edible oil sector needs a number of steps to reignite progress. PODB should be made fully functional, and it must coordinate policy, production and industry linkages across provinces, ensuring cooperation among all the stakeholders. Fresh agricultural graduates should be recruited and assigned specific targets for expanding oilseed acreage, improving yields, and adopting modern cultivation practices.

Provincial agriculture departments tend to prioritise wheat and sugarcane, leaving little room for oilseeds. Incentives, support prices and awareness campaigns should encourage farmers to diversify their efforts by opting for sunflower, canola, sesame and peanut cultivation.

Also, a rationalised tariff structure is essential to shield local farmers and processors from unfair competition caused by cheap import of oil and oilseeds. Oil palm initiatives in Sindh and Balochistan need to be revived under a unified national framework.

Pakistan's per capita consumption of edible oil exceeds 17kg annually. A public awareness campaign — in coordination with the relevant health authorities — can promote healthier and more sustainable consumption patterns.

Reviving this key sector of the national economy demands much more than just administrative adjustments; it requires a strong political will. If Pakistan is truly seeking to secure its future food security, it must breathe life back into the very institutions that once made it proud.

Ghulam Idris Khan
Islamabad

A serum, not a vaccine: Why accurate terms matter in snakebite treatment

In Pakistan, anti-snake venom (ASV) is often described as a 'vaccine' even though it is actually a serum. This mix-up appears frequently in public reporting. Recent news reports about the proceedings of Sindh Assembly's Public Accounts Committee have used the terms 'anti-snakebite vaccine', 'anti-snake venom vaccine' and 'ASV vaccine'. Technical sources, however, are accurate. The National Institute of Health, for instance, lists 'anti-snake venom serum' and 'anti-rabies serum' separately from preventive vaccines, and provincial documents clearly use the term 'antivenom'. The key difference here is simple. While a vaccine protects before exposure, a serum is a treatment post-exposure.

According to the World Health Organisation, vaccines train the immune system in advance, as was seen during the Covid epidemic a few years ago. On its part, a serum works very differently. ASV is a serum used after a bite and only in an emergency. The WHO explains that antivenom is made by immunising donor animals with venom, and then extracting antibodies that neutralise it inside the human body. The same mechanism applies to anti-rabies serum or rabies immuno-globulin. Simply put, serums give short-term protection after exposure, while vaccines build long-term immunity.

Understanding the difference between serum and vaccine is important because Pakistan already struggles with low health literacy. Many people do not have access to clear and simple medical information in the country. Terms like vaccine, serum, immunoglobulin or antivenom can be confusing for them. This confusion has the potential to affect behaviour, resulting in treatment delays and loss of trust in the healthcare system. Using correct terms is not a technical concern; it is a critical element in terms of public safety. Better wording supports public safety. Small improvements in how we communicate health terms can help people make safer decisions, and strengthen their trust in the national healthcare system.

Talib Haider
Karachi

Seniors without benefits

In our part of the world, people are considered 'senior' after reaching the age of 60. When I was that age, I was fortunate to be in good health and I continued to remain active as I considered myself still far from joining the 'seniors club'. Now having touched 80, I was expecting and keenly looking forward to seeing some benefits. I am absolutely disappointed to see nothing coming in the way of support.

To start with, going to National Savings centres, one has to take a token and be seated (if a seat is available) and wait for hours for one's call. During a visit to my bank, I saw four

counters — one for cheques/pay-orders, one for senior citizens, and two for the general public. Only two counters were functional. When I enquired why the counter meant for senior citizens was closed, the reply by the official was funny: "We do not have many senior citizens accounts here." Coming back from an overseas trip, I landed at the airport in Karachi early in the morning. There was too much rush. When I asked one official there, he told me that there were four flights, and only two counters for early-morning flights. When I requested him to help me as a senior citizen, his reply was hilarious: "All passengers are senior for us." He probably took seniors as 'elite' and not seniors in terms of age.

Seniors go through multiple health issues, including cataract, diabetes, etc. The fee of consultants and various laboratory tests are too high, and visits consume hours. Once I had to run from one section of the healthcare facility to the other to get the required treatment.

In contrast, my experience as a senior citizen outside Pakistan has been simply wonderful. On a visit to London, I remember, my wife and I got worried at Heathrow, watching a huge rush at immigration counters. All of a sudden, a young female immigration official came to us, took our passports and asked us to follow her. I was taken aback as to what happened and wondered where she was taking us. She took us to the counter and got our passports stamped immediately. When I thanked her, she said it was her duty to ensure the seniors were taken good care of.

We have been hearing for decades that the government is planning to introduce reforms to facilitate senior citizens. I hope the current government will take due steps to grant senior citizens some concessions in taxes. I have paid taxes for over four decades while performing my professional duties, and now, I believe, it is time to get some benefits in return.

Akber D. Vazir
Karachi

Digital literacy lessons

Every day, countless fake stories, edited videos and misleading posts circulate on social media. Many young people, without verifying facts, forward such content and unknowingly spread confusion, hate and fear. Digital misinformation threatens not only social harmony, but also national stability. The core issue is not technology itself, but the lack of responsibility regarding its use. Schools and colleges should include digital literacy lessons that teach students how to verify sources and identify fake news. The government must remove false information quickly from all platforms. Most importantly, parents should guide their children to pause and think critically before believing or sharing anything online.

Iqra Bibi
Rawalpindi

'Sophisticated' Bronze Age city unearthed in Kazakhstan

Skyler Ware

Archaeologists have uncovered a sprawling Bronze Age settlement on the steppe of Kazakhstan that was likely a major early city in its heyday about 3,600 years ago, a new study reports. The early city of Semiyarka spanned 346 acres (140 hectares) — more than four times larger than contemporary villages in the region. The site, which dates to 1600 B.C., is the first site in the region discovered to have significant space dedicated to metallurgy and tin-bronze production, according to the study, published in the journal *Antiquity*. "Semiyarka transforms our understanding of steppe societies," study first author Miljana Radivojević, an archaeologist at University College London, said in a statement. "It demonstrates that mobile communities were capable of building and sustaining permanent, well-organized settlements centered on large-scale metallurgical production." The site sits atop a bluff above the Irtysh River in northeastern Kazakhstan, looking out over a network of valleys. Its prominence prompted scientists to nickname it the "City of Seven Ravines," and its position suggests the city may have controlled movement along the river, the researchers wrote in the study. As the team surveyed the area with drones and excavated a few different sections of the site, they noticed two rows of earthworks, or large banks of soil, angled toward each other and divided into smaller structures. Walls made of mud brick were built along the insides of the banks and may have delineated individual households.



A larger central structure sat where the two rows met. This structure was about twice the size of the others and might have been used for rituals or government, the researchers proposed.

Plant-based or low-carb: Which is better for diabetes prevention?

Nancy Schimelpfening

New research suggests that most Americans are open to making big dietary changes if it could help prevent or control diabetes. A national poll conducted by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine and Morning Consult found that 65% of U.S. adults would consider adopting a low-fat, plant-based diet if their doctor recommended it. While many people know that eating more vegetables and fruits can lower diabetes risk, far fewer are aware that a low fat, plant-based eating pattern — rich in fruits, vegetables, grains, and beans — can help prevent or even reverse the disease.



In fact, only about 1 in 5 respondents recognized this connection. The poll surveyed 2,203 U.S. adults, aiming to assess awareness of dietary approaches to type 2 diabetes prevention and management, as well as openness to trying plant-based eating patterns. Respondents were asked about their knowledge of the role of fruits, vegetables, and plant-based diets in reducing diabetes risk, and about their willingness to adopt such diets if recommended by their physicians. Among respondents whose healthcare providers had discussed type 2 diabetes with them, 57% knew that high vegetable intake can lower their risk, and 34% were aware that high fruit intake can do the same. However, only 21% recognized that a low-fat, plant-based diet could help prevent or improve type 2 diabetes.

The poll also revealed a striking misconception: half of the adults who had spoken with their doctors about diabetes believed that a low-carbohydrate diet is the best approach. Research cited by the Physicians Committee indicates that low-carb diets based on animal products are associated with an increased risk of type 2 diabetes.

Scientists find rare tusked whale alive at sea for the first time

Patrick Pester

Rare tusked whales have been identified and photographed alive at sea for the first time following a herculean research effort off the shores of Mexico, a new study finds.



The newly-sighted cetaceans are ginkgo-toothed beaked whales (*Mesoplodon ginkgodens*), which were previously only known from dead individuals that had washed ashore and from by-catch. This isn't all that unusual for beaked whales, which are deep divers and notoriously cryptic, spending their lives away from coastlines. "Beaked whales are the largest least-known animals left on the planet," study co-author Robert Pitman, an affiliate of the Marine Mammal Institute at Oregon State University, told Live Science in an email. "It is exciting to think that there [are] still organisms here on earth that weigh over a ton and have never been identified alive in the wild." The hunt for and subsequent discovery of the elusive creatures was sparked by a recording of a distinct echolocation pulse in the North Pacific. Researchers began searching for the animals responsible for the mysterious sonar signal in 2020, and in June of 2024, it led them to a single beaked whale. Within days of that sighting, the team then found a small group of the whales, including a battle-scarred adult male and adult female with a calf.

Sleeping in total darkness is good for your heart. Here's why

Robby Berman

A new study builds on existing evidence that sleeping in less than complete darkness can be detrimental to health, specifically damaging the cardiovascular system.



Sleeping while exposed to higher levels of light was associated with stress-related brain activity known to cause arterial inflammation throughout the body. Such inflammation raises the likelihood of a heart attack and stroke.

After 10 years, 17% of the study participants had developed major cardiovascular issues. The authors found that as the amount of artificial light at night (LAN) exposure increased, so did the risk of eventual heart disease. Each standard deviation upward in light was associated with a 35% increased likelihood of a heart attack over the following five years and a 22% increased risk over the next 10 years.

People who lived in areas characterized by elevated environmental or social stressors — including noise from traffic and lower neighborhood income levels — were at an even greater risk from LAN. The study was presented at the American Heart Association (AHA) Scientific Sessions 2025, held from November 7 to 10 in New Orleans, LA. The findings have not yet been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. The study involved 466 adults who had received PET/CT brain imaging scans at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston between 2005 and 2008. Participants' median age was 55, and 43% were male. Nearly 90% of the participants were white, and just over 10% were non-white. The scans were performed as routine imaging at the hospital. The CT scans revealed the anatomical details of the participants' brains, while the PET scans recorded metabolic activity in their tissues.

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