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REVENUE GROWTH MASKED BY MISSED TARGETS, EVASION AND SYSTEMIC FLAWS

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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

Revenue growth masked by missed targets, evasion and systemic flaws

Farhan Khan

The Revenue Division's Year Book for 2024-25, published by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), reveals several noteworthy insights into the country's tax collection trends. The publication covers all major tax categories in detail. According to the Year Book, there has been an encouraging rise in the tax revenue growth rate during 2024-25. The total tax collected is estimated to have increased by 26.1 percent in 2024-25, compared to the relatively low growth rates of 9.1 percent and 9.4 percent recorded in the previous two years.

However, despite this positive momentum, the FBR once again failed to meet the revenue target set in the federal budget for 2024-25. Against the ambitious target of Rs12,970 billion, the actual revenue collected amounted to only Rs11,744 billion—reflecting a shortfall of Rs1,226 billion. Later in the fiscal year, the original target was revised downward to Rs11,901 billion under an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Consequently, as indicated in the Year Book, the shortfall now stands at Rs157 billion. This gap is partly explained by a decline in overall tax revenues from POL products—from Rs781 billion in 2023-24 to Rs754 billion in 2024-25—primarily due to a 15 percent reduction in the rupee value of POL imports.

The fundamental mistake was that the original revenue target was excessively ambitious and disconnected from prevailing economic realities, assuming a 39 percent growth over the actual figures achieved in 2023-24. Several factors contributed to the lower-than-expected revenue performance, including a steep decline in the inflation rate from 23 percent in 2023-24 to just 4.5 percent in 2024-25. GDP growth remained below 3 percent, while the rupee value of imports increased by only 5.4 percent. Even so, the federal tax-to-GDP ratio rose from 8.9 percent in 2023-24 to 10.2 percent in 2024-25, indicating an improvement of 1.3 percent.

Category-wise, excise duty grew by 32.8 percent, income tax by 27.9 percent, sales tax by 25.9 percent and customs duty by 16.4 percent. Within the income tax category, the fastest increases were observed in collection on demand, which grew by 110 percent, and payments with returns, which increased by 37 percent. However, both sources combined still account for only 9 percent of total income tax revenues. Withholding and advance taxes grew by 24 percent. Due to higher rates imposed last year, withholding tax on salaries surged by an extraordinary 54.7 percent. In addition, advance tax on sales of retailers and wholesalers rose by a remarkable 133 percent, with the total collection reaching Rs63 billion.

Despite the increase in revenue, it is important to note that the FBR has not succeeded in broadening the tax base. According to FBR officials, many high-income professionals—including doctors, lawyers and architects—do file tax returns but declare incomes far below their actual earnings. Since these individuals do not contribute their fair share of taxes, the burden shifts heavily onto the salaried class, which is subjected to an overall income tax rate of 38.5 percent, including surcharge.

A closer analysis of tax collection further reveals that the FBR has struggled to curb tax evasion in several sectors, such as cigarette manufacturing. Revenues from this industry have fallen by 4 percent recently. Evidence also shows that significant tax leakages are concentrated within the top five percent, particularly the top one percent, yet no effective measures have been introduced so far to plug these leakages.

Increasing tax revenue in the current financial year and beyond remains a major challenge for the FBR. The targeted increase in annual revenues is 20.3 percent, but during the first quarter of the current year, the actual growth achieved was only 12.5 percent, reflecting a shortfall of approximately Rs200 billion. The future performance of the FBR will depend mostly on the expansion of tax bases, which in turn will be influenced by real economic growth, inflation trends, and movements in the nominal exchange rate.

Comprehensive reforms in the FBR are long overdue to improve field-level performance of the tax machinery. At present, the government relies heavily on punitive taxes, which undermine compliance. International experience shows that tax compliance improves when tax rates are rationalized. Despite repeated promises, the government has made little progress in reducing power sector losses, forcing honest bill payers to shoulder the burden of non-payers. Alongside restructuring the FBR, the government should prioritize lowering tax rates, especially for the salaried class.

Rampant corruption continues to plague the tax system, and unless the entrenched nexus between corrupt tax officials and habitual tax evaders is decisively dismantled, meaningful improvement in revenue collection will remain elusive.

Population explosion threatens future stability

Nasim Ahmed

Among Pakistan's many high-voltage problems, runaway population growth remains at the top of the list, yet it continues to be the most neglected. A recent media seminar in Karachi underscored this issue in stark detail. With a population exceeding 241.5 million today, Pakistan is now the fifth most populous country in the world and is projected to reach 300 million by 2030 and 400 million by 2050.

Unchecked population growth has significantly undermined the quality of life. The latest Human Development Index ranks Pakistan at 168th out of 193 countries, marking a 35-year low and painting a bleak picture unless immediate corrective measures are pursued. The effects of rapid population expansion are felt across every sector—rising food insecurity, limited employment opportunities, crumbling infrastructure, and overstretched healthcare systems.

A persistently high fertility rate is the main driver behind this rapid growth. Pakistan's fertility rate, defined as the average number of children a woman bears during her reproductive years, currently stands at 3.6—the highest in South Asia. This uncontrolled increase has resulted in widespread malnutrition: 40 percent of children under five are stunted, 18 percent wasted, and 29 percent underweight. The infant mortality rate is alarmingly high as well, with 62 infants dying per 1,000 live births, amounting to nearly 140,000 deaths annually.

The burden of rapid population growth is evident in labour markets and in the deteriorating conditions of schools, hospitals, roads, and the already strained energy sector plagued by corruption and inefficiency. Per capita public spending on health and education remains significantly lower than in comparable countries. Pakistan also has one of the world's highest numbers of out-of-school children—24 million, according to a recent survey.

Low per capita investment in education, health, and skills training inevitably produces a population that is poorly educated, nutritionally deficient, and inadequately prepared for the demands of a modern economy. An estimated 37 percent of young Pakistanis between 15 and 24 years of age are neither employed nor engaged in education or training (NEET). Job creation continues to lag far behind the requirements of a youth bulge in which 64 percent of the population is under 30. Pakistan's expenditure on education is a mere 0.8 percent of GDP, far below UNESCO's recommended four to six percent. Consequently, the workforce is less productive, earns lower incomes, and contributes less to the national economy through taxes.

Such a labour force is ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of a modern economy and largely remains confined to low-productivity work, which undermines economic performance overall. The result is a dependency ratio of 68 percent, far higher than Bangladesh's 52.2 percent and India's 46.1 percent. This essentially means that nearly 70 percent of Pakistan's working-age population is not contributing productively.

Population pressure also weighs heavily on the health sector, where basic hospital facilities are lacking, immunisation coverage is inadequate, and maternal health indicators remain troubling. Pakistan records approximately 4.5 million births each year, placing enormous strain on hospitals that are chronically short of beds, medicines, and trained staff.

The country is also among the ten most climate-vulnerable nations. Rapid population growth is compounding the crisis by intensifying demand for water, food, and land. Climate change has pushed water scarcity to existential levels. Per capita water availability has declined by nearly 80 percent over the past seven decades. Agricultural land continues to shrink as unchecked urbanisation encroaches on fertile areas. Simultaneously, Pakistan faces a housing deficit of nearly 10 million units. Rising population levels have led to crowded cities where unauthorised settlements have mushroomed, resulting in sprawling slums and severe environmental degradation. Urban services such as water, sanitation, transport, and energy are becoming increasingly scarce with each passing year.

It is imperative that Pakistan confront the population challenge with urgency and embed it within the broader development framework of the country. Population policy must be integrated with economic planning. Family planning programmes and awareness campaigns need to be pursued far more aggressively. Simultaneously, innovative strategies must be developed to boost female labour force participation. Expanding economic opportunities for women will reinforce the importance of girls' education, ultimately contributing to lower fertility rates.

Policies that expand employment opportunities for women through vocational training, enhanced childcare support, and incentives for firms to hire and retain female workers must be prioritised. In addition, easier and wider access to family planning services should be ensured, with an emphasis on strengthening primary healthcare. Global experience shows that effective population planning is one of the most powerful levers for building an economy capable of supporting both current citizens and future generations.

Inflation at a crossroads

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's economic barometer—the Consumer Price Index (CPI)—has inched downward to 6.1 percent year-on-year for November, a marginal retreat from October's 6.2 percent peak, according to fresh data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS).

This softening, while a tentative nod to stabilizing supplies amid the Rabi sowing season, belies deeper undercurrents: core inflation's persistent grip, the lingering scars of June's devastating floods, and a monetary policy rate frozen at 11 percent since June—over twice the 5.01 percent average CPI for July-November. With the International Monetary Fund (IMF) championing "data-dependent" tightening under the $7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) approved in September 2024—set to run until late 2027—the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) faces a pivotal crossroads. Is the discount rate tethered to headline CPI, volatile core metrics, or the Fund's watchful gaze? As the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) convenes next on December 15, clarity on this yardstick could unlock relief for a debt-burdened economy teetering on recovery's edge.

The November CPI print, released on December 1, aligns closely with the Ministry of Finance's 5-6 percent forecast, signaling a fragile détente after a volatile year. Urban inflation ticked up to 6.1 percent from 6.0 percent in October, while rural eased to 6.3 percent from 6.6 percent, per PBS breakdowns. Month-on-month, prices rose a subdued 0.4 percent, down from October's 1.8 percent spike, buoyed by a 0.23 percent dip in food costs—tomatoes plunged 56 percent on bumper arrivals, offsetting onion surges of 59 percent. Non-perishables like wheat flour (up 15.7 percent) and sugar (34.8 percent) kept food inflation at 5.5 percent, a hair below October's 5.6 percent. Housing utilities accelerated to 5.3 percent, transport to 6.7 percent, but recreation costs fell 4.1 percent, tempering the overall ascent.

This moderation traces a jagged path through 2025's tumult. June's CPI dipped to 3.2 percent amid post-Ramadan lulls, July to 4.1 percent, and August to a low of 3.0 percent—pre-flood baselines that masked brewing storms. September's 5.6 percent surge coincided with the IMF's technical mission, which flagged "important shortcomings" in data sources underpinning a third of GDP, including the nascent Producer Price Index (PPI). October's 6.2 percent crest, the year's high, stemmed directly from June floods that ravaged Punjab's breadbasket, submerging 220,000 hectares of rice and maize, spiking perishable prices 14.9 percent MoM. November's ebb reflects partial recovery—better Rabi inputs and Afghan border reopenings eased logistics—but analysts like Topline Securities peg risks at 6.5-7.0 percent, citing "climateflation" from erratic monsoons.

Beneath the headline lurks core inflation's stubborn pulse, a metric SBP historically favored pre-2019 for its insulation from food and energy swings. November's non-food, non-energy (NFNE) urban core eased to 6.6 percent from 7.5 percent, rural to 8.2 percent from 8.4 percent. The 20 percent weighted trimmed mean—SBP's preferred gauge—dipped to 5.3 percent urban (from 6.0 percent) and 6.4 percent rural (from 6.8 percent), outpacing November 2024's 7.8 percent. If core drives decisions—as in the 2019 EFF under Governor Reza Baqir, IMF's ex-Egypt rep—the MPC could justify a 50-100 bps trim from October 27's hold at 11 percent. Yet, with the rate unchanged since June—post a 1,100 bps easing from 22 percent—the real policy stance hovers at 4-4.5 percent above CPI, double the 2-3 percent norm, stifling credit growth to 12 percent YoY and investment at 13.1 percent of GDP.

The IMF's shadow looms large. Since the EFF's greenlight, every missive—from the September 25 approval to May's first review—stresses "tight, data-dependent" policy to anchor inflation at 5-7 percent. The 37-month lifeline, ending October 2027, ties tranches to milestones like fiscal surpluses and reserve builds to $15.5 billion by December 2025. SBP's MPC, chaired by Governor Jameel Ahmad, insists on forward-looking positivity—core's decline signals room for cuts—but flood fallout tempers haste. June's deluge, the worst since 2022's $30 billion toll, displaced 6.9 million, razed 2.5 million acres of farmland, and inflated the current account deficit by $7 billion. Punjab's 60 percent rice wipeout and 35 percent cotton losses threaten exports—textiles down 6 percent July-November—while reconstruction strains budgets, shaving 0.5-2 percent off 3.0 percent GDP forecasts.

The National Institute of Disaster Management's "Comprehensive Study of Flood Events 1950-2025" prescribes resilience blueprints: flood-proof infrastructure, urban drainage overhauls in Karachi and Lahore, and Indus Basin pacts with India—stymied by geopolitical frost. Untapped, these gaps amplify volatility: food inflation, 40 percent of CPI, risks 7.2 percent spikes per JS Global. The EFF's climate rider, a $1.4 billion Resilience Facility, eyes adaptation, but implementation lags amid Rs744 billion verified damages.

Policymakers' conundrum crystallizes: outsource to IMF orthodoxy, or reclaim agency? Pre-2019, core guided easing; post-Baqir, CPI took precedence for transparency. November's dual dips—CPI to 6.1 percent, core to 6.4 percent rural trimmed—tilt toward a December cut, potentially 100 bps to 10 percent, aligning real rates at 3.9 percent above CPI. Yet, with EFF reviews quarterly and floods' $40 billion echo from 2022, caution prevails—reserves at $14.6 billion cover three months, but trade deficits yawn at $15.5 billion.

The MPC's December 15 verdict will illuminate: a trim could jolt LSM's 4.1 percent Q1 growth, easing SME loans at 15 percent and spurring 3.5 percent FY26 expansion per Finance Minister Aurangzeb. Stasis risks credit crunch, with M2 up 12 percent but private investment at 9.1 percent of GDP. Globally, peers like India's 6.5 percent rate anchor 7 percent growth; Pakistan's 11 percent, double, caps at 2.7 percent per ADB.

As 2025 closes, the rate riddle transcends metrics—it's a sovereignty test amid IMF stewardship. With floods' specter and core's caution, SBP must balance anchoring 5-7 percent targets against unleashing growth. A calibrated cut, data-cloaked, could herald autonomy; rigidity, prolonged pain. For 241 million Pakistanis—42 percent poor, 22 percent youth idle—the choice echoes: stabilize for whom, and at what cost?

Pakistan's deprivation divide

Muhammad Hassan

In the arid expanses of Balochistan, where dust storms whip across vast, unforgiving landscapes, the promise of Pakistan's demographic dividend feels like a cruel mirage. As Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb launched the Population Council's District Vulnerability Index (DVI) on November 17 in Islamabad, he laid bare a national reckoning: a 2.55 percent population growth rate—the region's highest—compounded by climate calamities and a GDP expansion of just 2.7 percent, far short of the 7 percent needed to sustain jobs and services for 255 million souls. Nearly 40 percent of children grapple with stunting, while floods and droughts ravage farmlands, displacing millions and inflating poverty to 42 percent. This isn't mere misfortune; it's a structural indictment, where 10 million Pakistanis—over half in Balochistan—endure profound deprivation in 20 of the nation's most vulnerable districts. As the government eyes a delayed Panda bond issuance in early 2026 to buoy finances, the DVI demands a pivot from rhetoric to radical equity, lest the federation fracture under its own weight.

The DVI, a UK-funded three-year endeavor blending 21 indicators across housing, communication, transport, livelihoods, health, education, and demographics, exposes a federation frayed by favoritism. Seventeen of the 20 most at-risk districts huddle in Balochistan—Washuk, Khuzdar, Zhob, Kohlu, Musakhel, Dera Bugti, Killa Saifullah, Kalat, Jhal Magsi, Nasirabad, Chagai, Barkhan, Harnai, Awaran, Kharan, Sherani, and Panjgur—home to 5.3 million souls, or 40 percent of the province's 13 million. Tharparkar in Sindh and Kohistan and North Waziristan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) round out the list, but Balochistan dominates, its 44 percent landmass yielding just 6.7 percent of GDP and scant infrastructure. In stark contrast, Punjab claims 13 of the 20 least vulnerable districts, its canals and motorways channeling 52 percent of the populace and 55 percent of economic output, while Sindh and KP snag the rest. This lopsided ledger, per Population Council Director Dr. Zeba Sathar, isn't geography's fault but policy's progeny—decades of centralized largesse starving peripheries.

Housing epitomizes the chasm. Sixty-five percent of households in these red zones cram into mud-brick katcha or semi-permanent shacks, vulnerable to quakes and monsoons. Jhal Magsi tops the ignominy at 97 percent, where families like those in remote hamlets endure 50-degree summers without ventilation, their roofs caving under rare rains. Sanitation fares worse: 40 percent lack toilets, breeding waterborne ills that claim 200,000 child lives yearly nationwide, disproportionately in Balochistan's hinterlands. Clean water? A luxury—unimproved sources afflict 30 percent, turning wells brackish from over-extraction, as in Chagai where salinity poisons 70 percent of aquifers.

Connectivity compounds isolation. Balochistan's skeletal roads—mere 10 percent paved versus Punjab's 70 percent—sever communities from markets and medics. Mobile coverage blanks out in 60 percent of its terrain, throttling remittances ($35 billion lifeline) and e-health pilots. Emergency response? A farce: ambulances traverse 100 kilometers in Barkhan, where response times stretch to 12 hours, versus Lahore's 20 minutes. Livelihoods teeter on subsistence herding and arid farming, with unemployment at 20 percent—highest in Sherani—funneling youth to militancy or migration, 335,000 fleeing in H1 2025 alone.

Health and education, the twin pillars of human capital, crumble under distance and denial. In Balochistan and KP, 70 percent of remote hamlets lie over 30 kilometers from clinics—93 kilometers in Awaran—yielding maternal mortality triple the national 186 per 100,000. KP's North Waziristan fares marginally better at 50 kilometers, but stockouts plague 80 percent of facilities, per WHO audits. Schools? High and higher secondary institutions average 12 kilometers away nationally, ballooning to 31 in Balochistan, where girls trek 40 kilometers in Tharparkar, dropout rates hitting 70 percent. Karachi boasts 5,000 schools; Balochistan, 2,000 for thrice the area. Literacy languishes at 42 percent provincially, versus Punjab's 66 percent, trapping generations in cycles of 40 percent child stunting.

This deprivation dovetails with demographic dynamite. Pakistan's 2.55 percent clip—outpacing India's 0.8 percent and Bangladesh's 0.9 percent—swells the populace by 6.5 million yearly, demanding 3-4 million jobs annually to avert a "trap" over dividend. GDP's 2.7 percent crawl, per IMF and ADB forecasts, yields negative per capita growth of -0.15 percent, eroding gains and inflating poverty from 24.3 percent in 2015 to 42 percent today. Balochistan's fertility at 3.5 births per woman—versus Punjab's 2.8—amplifies the strain, with 2 million under-fives and reproductive-age women in vulnerable zones bearing the brunt. Climate change, Pakistan's nemesis (seventh most vulnerable globally), exacts $3.5 billion yearly, floods in 2025 shaving 0.5 percent off growth, per Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb's clarion—"control population and climate"—resonates amid fiscal tightropes. The delayed Panda bond, a $250 million yuan-denominated debut in China's market, slips from November 2025 to January-February 2026, awaiting Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) nods for 95 percent guarantees alongside ADB. This third postponement—advised by Habib Bank and China International Capital—aims to refinance $1 billion Eurobonds due April 2026 at single-digit yields, diversifying from dollar debt amid reserves at $14.5 billion. Yet, without addressing Balochistan's voids—Rs100 billion for solar grids and mobile clinics—the bond's proceeds risk evaporating into urban enclaves.

Revitalization beckons through devolution. Aurangzeb advocates direct district funding, bypassing provincial chokepoints where 20 percent of allocations vanish to corruption. Pilot Rs50 billion for Balochistan's 17 districts: piped water to 1 million in Kharan, e-schools halving Tharparkar's 31-kilometer treks. Fertility curbs—expanding Benazir Income Support to 9 million families with contraceptive incentives—could trim growth to 1.5 percent by 2030, per the 2018 National Action Plan. Climate pacts, thawing Indus talks with India, promise basin-wide flood barriers, reclaiming 500,000 arable acres.

The DVI isn't cartography; it's a covenant. As Aurangzeb implored, "Adopt metrics for equitable planning," the onus falls on Islamabad and provinces to reroute Rs8 trillion FY26 budgets—elevating Balochistan's 9 percent share to 15 percent. KP's Kohistan, Sindh's Tharparkar demand parity, not pity. With Panda bonds as a bridge, Pakistan can forge resilience: harnessing youth in renewables, not remittances. The crossroads: invest in margins, or mourn a marginalized majority.

Can Pakistan escape the trade trap?

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's external sector is flashing red alerts as its merchandise trade deficit ballooned by a staggering 37 percent in the first five months of fiscal year 2026 (July-November 2025), swelling to $15.47 billion from $11.28 billion in the same period last year.

This escalation, driven by a 15.4 percent plunge in November exports to $2.39 billion—down from $2.83 billion in November 2024—coupled with a 5 percent uptick in imports to $5.25 billion, underscores a perilous imbalance that threatens to unravel recent macroeconomic gains. While the government, under the watchful eye of its 24th IMF program, clings to administrative import curbs as a stopgap, the data paints a grim portrait of recurring vulnerabilities. Experts warn that without a pivot toward homegrown reforms—slashing bloated expenditures and easing input costs—this cycle of deficits will propel the nation deeper into borrowing dependency, echoing the boom-bust traps long critiqued by economists and the Fund itself.

The November figures, released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, crystallize the distress. Exports, the linchpin of Pakistan's $35 billion annual foreign exchange earnings, contracted sharply amid global headwinds and domestic bottlenecks. Textiles, accounting for 53.97 percent of shipments, bore the brunt: cotton yarn and fabric outflows dipped 18 percent year-on-year, hampered by a 34 percent national cotton yield shortfall from floods and pest infestations. Rice exports, buoyed by basmati premiums, offered scant relief with a 2 percent nudge, but overall merchandise sales for July-November slid 6 percent to $12.84 billion. Imports, meanwhile, surged 13 percent cumulatively to $28.3 billion, fueled by eased restrictions to replenish industrial inventories—raw materials for textiles and pharmaceuticals alone gobbled 45 percent of the bill. November's $2.86 billion monthly gap, a 33 percent widening from $2.15 billion, signals that policy relaxations, intended to stoke production, have instead amplified the hemorrhage.

This trajectory isn't novel; it's the hallmark of Pakistan's chronic external fragility. The nation's export-to-GDP ratio, stagnant at 10.5 percent since 2020, lags India's 22 percent and Bangladesh's 15 percent, reflecting an overreliance on low-value commodities vulnerable to commodity price swings and climate shocks. Administrative import controls, greenlit by the IMF as a bridge to balance, have paradoxically boomeranged. By choking raw material inflows—Pakistan imports 70 percent of its textile inputs—these measures idled factories, slashing large-scale manufacturing growth to a tepid 2.7 percent in September 2025. The government's pledge to lift curbs upon positivity rings increasingly hollow as the current account flips from surplus to a $733 million deficit in July-October, per the State Bank of Pakistan. Reserves, propped at $14.5 billion by $3 billion Saudi rollovers, cover a precarious three months of imports—barely a buffer against the next shock.

The IMF's October 10, 2024, documents, part of the Extended Fund Facility's foundational review, dissect this malaise with unflinching precision. "Economic volatility has only increased over time, with a tight correlation between Pakistan's boom-bust economic outcomes and its macroeconomic policies," the report states, attributing the pattern to stimulus-fueled demand surges that outstrip supply capacity, eroding reserves while clinging to exchange rate pegs. Subsidies, masquerading as low-cost loans and exemptions—costing 4.61 percent of GDP—have warped incentives, favoring "infant" industries like real estate and sugar over competitive exporters. Price interventions in agriculture, fuel, and energy, layered with tariffs averaging 15 percent, tilt the field toward select lobbies, stifling innovation and trapping resources in inefficiency. Despite these crutches, the business sector hasn't ignited growth; instead, it perpetuates a cycle where fiscal deficits—projected at 5.9 percent of GDP in FY26—swell debt servicing to 50 percent of current expenditures, up from 55 percent last year on revised estimates. With the policy rate at 11 percent—double regional peers like India's 6.5 percent—borrowing costs for exporters hover at 15-18 percent, crimping margins and investment.

This distortion exacts a human toll. The trade slump has shuttered 150 textile mills since 2023, axing 500,000 jobs in a sector employing 45 percent of the industrial workforce. Rural cotton farmers, battered by a 3.3 percent output drop to 6.85 million bales, face incomes slashed 20 percent amid input inflation. Youth unemployment, at 22 percent, swells illegal migration—335,000 departed in H1 2025—while remittances, a $35 billion lifeline, face global remittance corridor squeezes. The IMF's verdict is damning: without dismantling these privileges, Pakistan's 2.7 percent growth forecast for 2025 risks stalling, perpetuating a 42 percent poverty rate and eroding the demographic dividend from 64 percent under-30s.

The prescription demands courage beyond compliance. Phasing out IMF-mandated austerity—tax-to-GDP hikes to 15 percent and subsidy trims—requires bolstering leverage through in-house overhauls. Slashing current expenditures by Rs1 trillion, as independent economists advocate, could liberate funds for export incentives: zero-rating local inputs under the Export Facilitation Scheme, energy tariffs at 8 cents per unit (versus 12 cents now), and R&D credits for value-added textiles. A "charter of economy," floated in September 2025, could enshrine cross-party commitments to trade diversification—targeting $40 billion exports by FY28 via IT, pharma, and agro-processing hubs—while enforcing anti-dumping on subsidized imports.

Regional contrasts sting. Bangladesh's garment surge, absorbing 4 million women through skills pacts, lifted its deficit-to-GDP to 4 percent; India's PLI schemes funneled $25 billion into electronics, flipping deficits positive. Pakistan must emulate: geospatial crop zoning to reclaim 500,000 acres for cotton, digital single-windows slashing export clearances to 24 hours, and green bonds for climate-resilient supply chains.

The 24th IMF program offers a lifeline, but sustainability demands breaking the subsidy shackles and expenditure bloat. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's vows for "home-grown" revival ring true only if paired with action: audit elite exemptions, redirect Rs500 billion from mark-ups to industrial parks. The trade deficit's 37 percent roar isn't fate—it's a summons to reform. Heed it, and Pakistan forges resilience; ignore it, and the bust deepens, consigning potential to perpetual peril.

Fault lines of a new era

Raza Khan

In the past few years, several major international conflicts, alongside China's determined efforts to bolster its military capabilities while achieving remarkable success in amassing substantial economic influence, the United States' persistent drive to preserve its overarching strategic military and economic supremacy—and in this context, the American electorate's decision to re-elect Donald Trump as president in the 2024 election—have profoundly shaped and continue to mold a nascent international order fraught with immense challenges and inherent risks.

The conflicts that have notably accelerated the transformation toward this new international order over recent years encompass the ongoing crisis in Gaza, where Israel stands accused of perpetrating genocide against Palestinian Muslims. This confrontation erupted abruptly when the Palestinian resistance organization, Hamas, executed a series of coordinated assaults on Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) installations in October 2023, and it has persisted relentlessly, resulting in the tragic loss of over 67,000 lives as reported by Palestinian health authorities up to October 2025. Credible analyses, including those from The Lancet, suggest the traumatic injury death toll alone exceeded 64,000 by mid-2024, with estimates climbing higher amid ongoing hostilities. There are mounting reports indicating that Israel now harbors intentions to fully annex Palestinian territories, effectively dismantling the long-standing two-state solution framework—comprising independent Israel and Palestine—permanently. Furthermore, apprehensions abound that Israel, seeking to fortify its position in a profoundly antagonistic regional environment encircled by Arab Muslim nations, may aspire to forge a "Greater Israel" through aggressive territorial encroachments into neighboring sovereign states such as Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and potentially even Saudi Arabia.

The recent Israeli airstrike on the neutral Gulf state of Qatar on September 9, 2025—targeting Hamas leadership in a residential complex during ceasefire discussions—exemplifies Israel's apparent compulsion to eradicate perceived adversaries with scant consideration for the territorial sovereignty or national cohesion of other countries. This escalation and Israel's broader objectives have galvanized Arab and Muslim nations to convene at least in forums debating countermeasures against Tel Aviv's actions. Discussions have surfaced regarding the establishment of an Islamic military alliance, though such an endeavor appears ambitious and distant at present. Nonetheless, Arab and Muslim countries must inevitably formulate tangible and robust military responses to curb Tel Aviv's advances in the near future. The potential emergence of an Islamic or Muslim states alliance cannot be discounted entirely, and should preparatory measures materialize toward this goal, it would dramatically influence the contours of the evolving international landscape.

Another pivotal conflict that has irrevocably altered the contours of the previous international order is Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of key Ukrainian territories in February 2022. Since its inception, this war has shown no signs of abatement, with both Russia and Ukraine engaging in extensive, devastating offensives against one another, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands and inflicting unparalleled destruction across vast swathes of land. Estimates from independent sources like Mediazona and BBC Russian indicate that Russian military fatalities alone have surpassed 197,000 by early September 2025, with total casualties approaching one million when including wounded and missing personnel.

The profound significance of the Russian-Ukrainian war lies in its manifestation of the rekindling rivalry between the US-led Western bloc, primarily orchestrated through their premier military pact, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Russia, increasingly supported by China. It is precisely this dynamic that has prompted observers to label the conflict as the harbinger of a new Cold War era. Compelling arguments substantiate this characterization, underscoring how this confrontation has propelled the development of a revamped international order wherein Russia endeavors to reclaim its stature as a formidable great power and to contest Western hegemony outright. In reality, Moscow has rationalized its incursion and territorial seizures in Ukraine by asserting that Kyiv's overtures to NATO represented an attempt to embed the alliance within Moscow's vital strategic hinterland, thereby constituting an existential peril to Russia's very survival and security.

It merits particular emphasis here that numerous scholars specializing in international politics contend that the Post-Cold War global order (post-1991), predicated on unchallenged United States dominance, has definitively eroded, supplanted by a landscape where China, as an ascendant power, has substantially eroded Washington's preeminence worldwide, while Russia, through its belligerent campaign against neighboring Ukraine, has sought—as previously delineated—to reclaim a central role in global affairs as a preeminent great power. Consequently, a novel iteration of the world order has been crystallizing in recent years, one in which the US retains primacy but faces intensifying challenges from China to its supremacy, even as Russia independently hurls defiant challenges at the US-led Western alliance. Meanwhile, Israel pursues the eradication of the acute existential threat posed by Muslim militant entities like Hamas to its national security, yet in so doing, it has inflicted disproportionate casualties on innocent Palestinian civilians.

India, too, has undertaken bold and substantive measures to ascend as a major global power. In this vein, China under the stewardship of Xi Jinping is aggressively contesting US hegemony via its ambitious blueprint for economic coalescence encompassing approximately 60 Afro-Eurasian nations through the landmark one trillion US dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) constitutes a cornerstone component. As of the first half of 2025, BRI engagements have reached unprecedented heights, with $123 billion in deals,

including a surge in green energy projects, underscoring China's pivot toward sustainable infrastructure amid global economic pressures.

Since the conclusion of the Cold War, the preponderance of great powers have recalibrated their foreign policies to prioritize geo-economic imperatives, deliberately eschewing traditional geo-strategic pursuits and ideological crusades. The meteoric ascent of China, accompanied by the proliferation of state capitalism, has further accentuated this tilt toward geo-economics over conventional geopolitics. Geo-economics entails deploying economic instruments such as trade agreements, developmental aid, and strategic investments to accomplish geopolitical ends, including the modulation of other states' behaviors and policy orientations. Complementarily, geo-economics also encompasses leveraging geopolitical mechanisms—like armed interventions, diplomatic maneuvers, and border governance protocols—to secure geo-economic gains, for example, fostering GDP expansion and elevating the socioeconomic welfare of populations.

China emerges as the preeminent proponent of geo-economics, manifesting this through colossal undertakings like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aspires to economically interconnect, as elaborated earlier, roughly 60 nations spanning the Afro-Eurasian expanse. Thus, the geo-economic orientation permeating Chinese foreign policy has unequivocally elevated it to genuine great power status, positioning Beijing on an inexorable trajectory to emerge as a paramount global power center.

Nevertheless, Israel and another consequential global actor, the Russian Federation, remain deeply immersed in antiquated geopolitical paradigms. This persistence may stem from the fact that Russia's self-proclaimed President Vladimir Putin has consolidated authority for over two decades, while in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu labors assiduously to render his nation impregnable against threats. Consequently, rather than channeling exhaustive resources into comprehensive economic enhancement, both Moscow and Tel Aviv have fixated on modalities to augment their territorial holdings—a quintessential geopolitical ambition—by steadfastly retaining control over Crimea, which remains historically Ukrainian territory, and in Israel's instance, Gaza. While Russia might derive certain geo-economic benefits from clinging to Crimea, the overarching strategy underpinning such retention is predominantly geostrategic in nature. The Russian-Ukrainian war serves as a stark illustration of this entrenched approach.

Following the termination of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the world effectively transitioned into a unipolar configuration dominated by a singular hegemon. In the post-Soviet and post-Cold War epoch, the United States has exerted near-absolute sway over the international political arena. Yet, this hegemony has engendered both boons and banes. During the Cold War period, the paramount challenge to US preeminence emanated from non-state actors rather than peer-state adversaries.

Conversely, the international political milieu has been inexorably evolving toward the precipice of yet another Cold War paradigm. Once more, American global ascendancy confronts jeopardy, this time predominantly from state actors, with China posing the most formidable threat in this regard. The escalating trade frictions between China and the United States, interspersed with sporadic naval confrontations in the South China Sea and acrimonious disputes over Taiwan and Hong Kong, serve as telltale indicators of this emergent Cold War dynamic.

The global power configuration has undergone seismic transformation, with China solidifying its position as an entrenched power nexus—a development that presents intriguing prospects yet harbors concomitant perils. Meanwhile, the United States, after two decades of futile occupation in Afghanistan, effected a withdrawal from the nation in 2021. Although the US deploys Israel as a proxy instrument in the Middle East theater, with the latter reciprocally viewing Washington as its paramount guardian, should current trajectories persist unabated, the delineations of this nascent order will sharpen into greater clarity in the ensuing years.

In a world gone silent, Pakistani siblings refuse to whisper

Rasheed Ali

They are not diplomats, not activists trained in negotiation, and not even old enough to vote. Yet, on a day when the world was once again called to stand with the Palestinian people, two young siblings from Lahore stepped forward with a conviction that many adults no longer dare to carry. Eleven-year-old Ubaida Al FiddhahHafiah and her thirteen-year-old brother Ghulam Bisher Hafi have become unlikely torchbearers of a movement that refuses to let the suffering of Gaza's children be reduced to statistics and footnotes. Their campaign, simply and powerfully named "Voice for the Voiceless," has grown far beyond what their age suggests possible.

Their latest appeal came on the 2025 International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, as the Gaza ceasefire — brokered with international effort — continued to be violated. According to their press release, the ceasefire had already been breached 497 times in just 44 days, leaving hundreds more dead since October 10. Against this bleak backdrop, the siblings offered a statement that was as haunting as it was determined: "If the world's ink is running dry, we're here to write it with our own blood. If the world's ears are turning deaf or failing to listen — we're here to break the silence by turning our blood into a voice for the voiceless. Humanity is running short of time!"

Their sensitivity to the crisis in Gaza did not emerge overnight. Last year, the pair launched their movement in a manner that startled many adults — writing their 'own-blood-written' notes to mark the International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression. The act was symbolic, dramatic, and a reflection of just how deeply they felt the agony of children across conflict zones. It set the tone for what would become a sustained campaign, built not on political pragmatism but on the raw, unfiltered anguish that children feel when they witness injustice.

To them, what is happening in Gaza is not just war, not just a humanitarian disaster, and not merely a geopolitical conflict — it is, as they describe it, "systematic terrorism on children." Their words carry no hesitation. They speak of "shooting babies in cradles," "bombing maternity homes," and "child starvation as a weapon of war." They mention disabled children burned alive. "This is not war," they say. "Not at all. It cannot even be placed in the category of war crimes. It is unprecedented in recorded human history."

Their activism quickly moved beyond symbolic acts. On January 21, 2025, the

siblings filed a petition demanding urgent attention to the "left-alone innocents" of Gaza. Accompanied by an assembly of schoolchildren, they signed a resolution echoing what they described as the "stark scream" of more than 14,000 "dying-alive" children— a term they use to emphasise the torturous slowness of suffering caused by starvation, siege, and untreated injuries.

Their voices grew louder still on June 6, 2025, when they wrote an open letter addressed simultaneously to the President of the United States and Benjamin Netanyahu. The letter pulled no punches. It questioned the justification put forward at the United Nations after the US vetoed a Gaza ceasefire resolution. "How many thousands of innocent children need more to be systemically starved to death — ruthlessly slaughtered — smashed and beleaguered in the streets — to be termed a systematic infanticidal and genocidal operation?" the siblings asked. These were not the words of policymakers; they were questions posed from the raw conscience of youth.

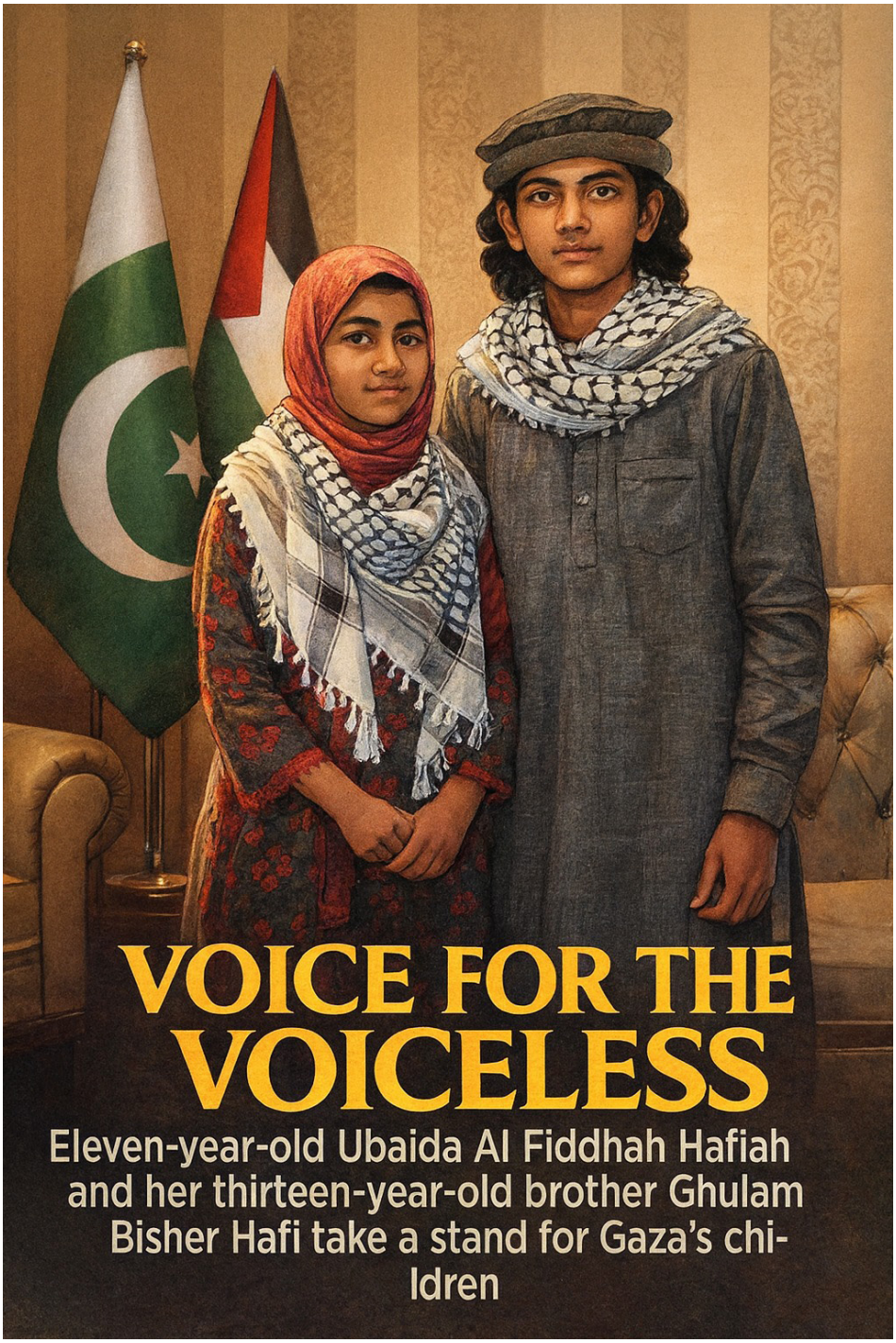
What is perhaps most striking is how far their voices have reached. The State of Palestine officially owns and endorses their campaign, recognising it as a genuine expression of solidarity. The Embassy of Palestine in Pakistan hosted a special reception to honour them — an extraordinary gesture for activists so young. Palestinian Ambassador Dr. Zuhair Zaid presented them with a heartfelt letter, acknowledging their consistent, courageous stand for Gaza's children. He said, "I feel myself at loss of words to describe what they have manifested in their solidarity with Palestinian children".

At a time when global advocacy often feels overshadowed by political alliances and media fatigue, the siblings' recognition by Palestine stands as proof that authenticity still cuts through noise.

Their concerns extend beyond ceasefire violations. They speak of the long-term human cost: the hundreds of thousands of newly orphaned children, many with no surviving family members; the thousands who now face life with permanent disabilities; the children living in makeshift shelters with food insecurity stalking every breath. They describe these survivors as "left with nothing more than the remaining pulse of survival..." a line that captures the fragile threshold on which so many Gazan children now stand.

For the siblings, the word 'ceasefire' is not enough. Hope may flicker, but questions loom larger. What becomes of the children who have lost everything? Who will rebuild their futures? They fear that in the rush of diplomatic negotiations and international politics, the most vulnerable — the children — will once again be forgotten.

What makes their movement so compelling is its unfiltered moral clarity. There are no political calculations, no diplomatic phrases, no attempts to soften the language. Their campaign arises from innocence confronting brutality, from childhood refusing to accept the destruction of other childhoods. It is activism rooted not in ideology but in empathy — and that is perhaps what gives it such unexpected power.



In a world that often grows numb to crises, where humanitarian reports can feel repetitive and distant, the voices of these two Pakistani children break through with disarming sincerity. They remind audiences, policymakers, and communities that every number in a news report represents a life that could have been full — a life now ended or forever altered.

Their movement continues because Gaza's crisis continues. It continues because many children now depend on global solidarity for survival. And it continues because these siblings believe that silence, at this moment, is a form of complicity.

As long as the children of Gaza struggle to breathe, gasp for relief, or wait for unseen hands to pull them from rubble, two young voices in Pakistan refuse to let the world look away. Their message is simple: when humanity fails to speak, children will.

Agriculture on the brink

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Agricultural experts have raised urgent alarms about the detrimental impact of climate change on horticultural and crop yields. They emphasize that clinging to centuries-old seeding and irrigation practices, instead of embracing advanced technologies, will soon plunge us into severe food insecurity and a potentially irreversible water crisis.

Pakistan has reached an unparalleled landmark as its agrarian sector exports soared to an extraordinary $8 billion for the inaugural time in the fiscal year spanning from July 2023 to June 2024. Yet, the specter of climate change looms ominously, threatening not only agriculture but the very fabric of life itself. For an extensive period, Pakistan has grappled with the repercussions of climate change. The catastrophic floods from 2010 to 2014 wreaked untold devastation. Particularly, the deluge of 2010 stands as the most calamitous disaster in Pakistan's chronicles, inflicting a $10 billion economic loss and exacerbating food insecurity by 10%. Despite climate change's widespread destruction, the agricultural sector endures as one of the most grievously afflicted. Pakistan's geographical location predisposes it to a precipitous decline in crop productivity.

Research indicates that climate change will slash agricultural productivity in Pakistan by 8-10% by 2040, with wheat emerging as a principal casualty. Another forecast anticipates that wheat and rice crops will bear the brunt of climate change's adverse impacts in the ensuing years, predicting a 6% reduction in wheat yield and a 15-18% decline in Basmati rice yield across the nation, save for the northern regions.

The Global Change Impact Study Centre further predicts that climate change is causing crop seasons to contract and shift, portending severe repercussions for future crop productivity. Sea encroachment presents an additional dilemma, swallowing up fertile lands. Badin, in particular, has borne the worst impact, with hundreds of acres of productive terrain lost to the encroaching sea. It is also foreseen that climate change will usher in novel diseases, posing fresh challenges to the agricultural sector.

In light of this, the ramifications of inaction are exorbitant. As an agrarian nation, Pakistan's economy is inextricably linked to agriculture, which supports millions of livelihoods and supplies inexpensive raw materials for key industries such as textiles and leather. Most critically, its contribution to food security is both invaluable and irreplaceable.

Currently, Pakistan contends with the daunting challenge of food insecurity, with approximately 58% of its populace affected. Envision a scenario where the population continues to swell while food production dwindles—an alarming and harrowing prospect. In this context, Pakistan must urgently implement measures to avert disaster. Initially, it is imperative to map vulnerabilities across agro-ecological zones, as each zone possesses distinct dynamics.

Agricultural experts have sounded the alarm with utmost urgency, warning that climate change is severely impacting horticultural and crop yields. If centuries-old seeding and irrigation practices are not replaced with advanced technologies immediately, we will soon confront "serious food insecurity" and a potentially irreversible water crisis. A mere two-degree increase in temperature can slash agricultural output by 20%, a scenario that, without preemptive planning, necessitates costly, last-minute imports with no assurance of sufficient supply.

This situation spells doom for small farmers, who will be crushed, and even large-scale farmers will incur substantial losses. The government's failure to declare an agriculture emergency and enforce the widespread adoption of modern seeding and irrigation technologies exacerbates this crisis.

Many observers have long advocated for such measures, even before climate change was recognized as a critical issue. Yet, no government, irrespective of political affiliation, has effectively addressed this need. Agriculture, purportedly Pakistan's natural strength, comparative advantage, largest employment sector, and the backbone for countless families, has deteriorated from a net exporter to a chronic importer. This decline is largely due to the persistence of archaic methods, despite the global shift to innovative practices driven by climate change.

Research by the World Resources Institute indicates that Pakistan's agricultural output could plummet by 50% from 2015 to 2050 due to climate change and its effects on crop yields. Changing weather patterns, particularly shifts in summer and winter rainfalls, are poised to inflict unprecedented damage.

Compounding this issue is our reluctance to embrace modern technology, leading to a drastic reduction in water availability. Pakistan, once among the most water-abundant nations, is now one of the most water-scarce.

Despite the establishment of research centers and a climate change ministry, experts and stakeholders lament the ineffectiveness of these institutions in aiding farmers. The argument that farmers are resistant to change is no longer acceptable. We must take a leaf out of China's book, where proactive measures and advanced technologies have revolutionized the agricultural sector.

This should serve as the final wake-up call for the government. The collapse of the agricultural sector, combined with a water crisis, will trigger economic, social, and political turmoil that could cripple the nation. Ignoring this warning signifies a profound failure to grasp the severity of the situation.

Xenophobia runs the world

Somdeep Sen

"I don't want them in our country. I'll be honest with you, OK. Somebody will say, 'Oh, that's not politically correct.' I don't care. I don't want them in our country. Their country is no good for a reason ..."

This is what United States President Donald Trump had to say about Somali migrants on the first day of an immigration crackdown targeting their community. He insisted that Somali migrants have turned the US state of Minnesota, where some 2 percent of the population is of Somali descent, into a "hellhole" and should be "out of here". Then, directing his ire at his vocal critic, Ilhan Omar, a Somali-born Democratic representative from Minnesota, Trump said, "She's garbage. Her friends are garbage. These aren't people who work. These aren't people who say, 'Let's go, come on, let's make this place great. '"

Of course, none of this is new or surprising. Hatred of migrants and asylum seekers has always been the glue that holds Trump's MAGAverse together. Who can forget that, before his cordial meeting with Trump at the White House, several MAGA Republicans made serious efforts to revoke the US citizenship of New York City mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani. Since Trump's rise to power, hostility to migrants has become not just a mainstream component of contemporary politics in the United States but a governing principle.

But the rise in anti-migrant sentiment, and its validation and promotion by those in positions of power, is not exclusive to Trump's increasingly insular America. Similar rhetoric and tactics are gaining ground elsewhere, revealing a global trend that extends far beyond the United States. Denmark is one such example.

Beneath its long-cultivated image as a progressive, humane and orderly society built on universal healthcare, Lego, highly liveable cities and minimalist designer aesthetics, Denmark has in recent years become one of Europe's most restrictive states on immigration and asylum. During the recently concluded local elections, Islamophobic rhetoric was on full display, and in the lead-up to the 2026 national elections, the ruling Social Democrats have placed their commitment to tackling the so-called problem of immigration at the centre of their campaign.

Across the pond, in the United Kingdom, the supposedly progressive Labour government seems eager to follow the Danish example. Under pressure from the far right and Reform UK's enduring rise in the polls, Prime Minister Keir Starmer is eager to convince people that he can be trusted to take back control of our borders and close the book on a squalid chapter of Britain's immigration policy. He has warned that the UK risks becoming an island of strangers unless immigration is sharply reduced, and has promised that his government's reforms will ensure that migration will fall. That is a promise. Most strikingly, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood recently sent officials to Denmark to study its immigration and asylum regime, a gesture that underscores how dramatically Labour's stance has hardened.

Xenophobia is also on the rise outside the Western world. It is a staple of policy and practice from Libya to South Africa, a reminder that anti-migrant politics is now a global tool of governance.

Europe-bound migrants in Libya face horrific levels of violence and abuse. According to Amnesty International, they are subjected

to prolonged arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, rape, unlawful killings, extortion and forced labour. These abuses occur within a system effectively underwritten by European governments, which have funnelled funding, training and equipment to Libyan coast-guard units tasked with intercepting migrants before they reach international waters. Keen to stem the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean, European Union states have outsourced border control to Libya despite knowing the consequences, supporting the authorities' ability to continue with measures the United Nations says could very likely amount to crimes against humanity.

Further west, in Tunisia, Black African migrants have faced sporadic violence for years. In early 2023, President Kais Saied claimed there was a criminal plan to change Tunisia's demographic makeup through irregular migration, turning it into a purely African country that has no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic nations. His remarks triggered a surge in mob attacks on Black migrants, students and asylum seekers. There was also an increase in arrests, and the police appeared to be targeting Black African foreigners based on their appearance. Those detained included undocumented migrants, registered refugees and asylum seekers, as well as migrants with valid credentials, a stark demonstration of how state practices can shift once xenophobia is given political sanction.

Similarly, xenophobia targeting migrants from other African countries has been a constant feature of life and politics in post-apartheid South Africa. According to Xenowatch, a project hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand that tracks xenophobic discrimination and violence, there have been 1,295 recorded incidents since 1994, including displacement, looting of migrant-owned businesses and killings. Deaths peaked in 2008 with 72 fatalities and 150 incidents. In 2025, while 16 people were killed, the overall number of xenophobic incidents again reached 2008 levels, underscoring the persistence of the crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government systematically overlooked migrant communities, excluding many from relief programmes and framing protection of South Africans as the priority. The state also constructed a 40-kilometre fence along the border with Zimbabwe to block infected or undocumented persons, despite Zimbabwe having only 11 confirmed COVID-19 cases at the time compared with South Africa's 1,845. Politicians reinforced existing myths about foreign-owned businesses posing health risks. When announcing that spaza shops could remain open, the then-Minister of Small Business Development, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, declared that only South African-owned, managed and run shops would remain open.

South Africa has also seen the rise of explicitly anti-immigrant mobilisation. The Put South Africans First movement, a coalition of civil society groups advocating the mass deportation of African migrants, organised a march to the Nigerian and Zimbabwean embassies on September 23, 2020, claiming that foreigners contribute to South Africa's social ills such as drugs, human trafficking and child abductions.

The vigilante group Operation Dudula emerged from this movement in 2021, following the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma. Although it claims to address crime and drug use in Gauteng communities, its name, Dudula – meaning "force out" in isiZulu – captures its true focus. The group is better known for calling for mass deportations, blocking migrants from accessing hospitals and clinics, and raiding or shutting down foreign-owned businesses.

Global inaction on terrorism

Terrorism, in every guise and in every corner of the world, stands as a repudiation of the shared concept of humanity. No civilisation, no religion and no moral code sanctions the taking of innocent lives. To link this evil to any faith is to misread both history and reality.

Terrorism has neither a single home nor a single face; it is an affliction that has struck schools in Pakistan, concerts in Europe, shopping centres in the United States, homes in Gaza, and public spaces regardless of geography. The pain it inflicts is universal, and so must be the condemnation it receives.

Pakistan's experience with terrorism has been particularly acute. Over the last two decades, the country has lost more than 70,000 lives — both civilians and security personnel — and has suffered economic losses estimated in hundreds of billions of dollars. Development in many regions has been delayed by years.

No city or town has been left untouched by the violence of extremist groups. This sustained assault reflects a deliberate and calculated strategy to weaken Pakistan from within, and malign it internationally.

Pakistan has consistently presented evidence to the global community about the origins of these attacks. Yet, while sympathetic statements have been issued in response, concrete action against the perpetrators or their sponsors has remained largely absent. Diplomatic caution, geopolitical alliances and economic interests have too often overshadowed moral responsibility.

The pattern becomes even clearer when major events take place across Pakistan. Whenever foreign sports teams visit — cricket tours being the most visible example — terrorist attempts emerge with suspicious coordination. Years of such manipulation have revealed a strategic intent; to keep Pakistan unstable, isolated and under pressure. In response, Pakistan has taken difficult internal steps, including the repatriation of Afghans living illegally within its borders. This was not an impulsive decision, but one rooted in national security concerns and the international principle that undocumented residents must eventually regularise their status or return home. While Pakistan acted firmly but lawfully, India exploited this moment of regional tension to escalate disinformation campaigns and support anti-Pakistan activities through covert channels. Instead of addressing the root causes, the international system has largely confined itself to verbal regrets. The consequences of this global inaction are now becoming increasingly evident outside our region as well, underlining the undeniable truth; instability cannot be contained within geographical borders.

If the international community continues to dismiss Pakistan's concerns while reacting only when violence reaches major Western cities, the global fight against terrorism will remain fragmented and ineffective. Terrorism is not an issue of selective vigilance; it requires collective responsibility and uniform action grounded in justice, not geopolitics.

Muhammad Mohsin Iqbal
Islamabad

Beyond charity: Addressing the roots of begging and poverty

The people who beg often are those who have suffered from depression, mental confusion and sexual harassment. Doing charity is great, but it is not a permanent solution to begging. Their generations will continue to suffer and beg for money.

Moreover, financially and physically sound people can take advantage of this kindness, and cheat their way to earn and steal the rights of those who are actually the needy ones.

The government and society have to work together to combat poverty, like a comb that untangles hair. We should not just give money to the poor and the needy; we should give them hope, guidance and support as well. We must help them stand on their own feet and earn with dignity. Society needs to untangle their minds, provide them with education and skills, such as handicraft, labour and computer skills, and guide them to become self-reliant. Instead of feeling pity for them, we must pave the way for their comfortable homes and bright future. As such, the government needs to set up organisations to provide opportunities to the poor and the needy, tackle poverty, and build a self-dependent and prosperous society. Poverty is a pressing issue, and this social evil cannot be resolved through charity alone. Society has to make a beginning now, because it is better late than never.

Muqadas Qabulio
Jamshoro

When accent becomes a barrier

It has been years since I left my hometown in Balochistan to pursue higher education. Coming from a certain background, I carried the accent of my community: its sound shaped by dust, distance and dialogue. I once believed that my ideas and efforts mattered more than how I sounded. But over time, I have realised that in Pakistan, accent often speaks louder than competence.

In classrooms, most students from rural regions hesitate to speak. A single mis-pronunciation can trigger laughter or quiet correction. The result is not improved fluency, but growing silence that travels with them beyond the classroom. In Pakistan's schools and offices, the struggle is not about grammar, but about accent.

Rural voices, shaped by Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto, Balochi or Saraiki people, are quietly judged the moment they speak. One different vowel, one uneven rhythm, and the verdict is: 'uneducated', 'unrefined'.

A 2025 study found that speakers with local or non-urban accents are rated as less intelligent and employable than those with city or foreign ones. Research from Karachi's leading business school confirms that employers often favour urban accents. The problem here is not competence; it is prejudice disguised as polish.

I have often been told to work on my accent, but I choose not to. My accent is my identity, shaped by the land and people I come from. It does not limit me; it defines me, making my voice distinct, diverse and rooted in authenticity. When Pakistan mocks rural tones and praises borrowed ones, it kills confidence and celebrates imitation.

The real divide in this country is not between English and Urdu, but between those allowed to speak freely and those forced to measure every word. Until we learn to respect every voice, we will keep mistaking silence for something it is not.

Almas Kurd
Karachi

Gas shortages

The persistent low pressure of gas has increased the hardship of domestic consumers in Rawalpindi's Morgah area. During peak hours, the pressure drops to a level where stoves barely flicker, making it impossible to cook meals. Students are missing breakfast, working women are unable to prepare meals on time, and families are compelled to rely on expensive and often risky alternatives. The community comprises people who are conscientious, bill-paying customers, and it is the basic responsibility of the authorities concerned to ensure a smooth and adequate gas supply. The government should devise a clear and feasible strategy to manage the growing supply-demand gap, and crack down on illegal practices that deprive paying consumers of their rightful supply.

Saifullah Mir
Rawalpindi

Poor hygiene at eateries

In many restaurants today, cleanliness has become a forgotten responsibility. Dust, trash and unhygienic surroundings clearly show the lack of due care. Many eateries do not follow basic hygiene standards. Food is prepared with unwashed hands, and workers rarely wear gloves. Utensils are reused without proper cleaning. As a result, the chances of food poisoning and stomach-related diseases increase. Adding to this, the area around the stalls is full of flies, mosquitoes and unpleasant smells, making the whole environment unhealthy. These issues highlight the urgent need for strict mon¬it¬or¬ing. The authorities must ensure that restaurants and food stalls maintain the required cleanliness and follow food safety rules.

M. Asif
Dasht

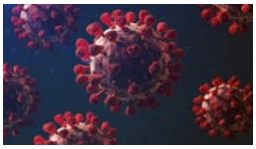
Pre-workout supplements tied to alarming reductions in sleep duration

Vijay Kumar Malesu

According to a new study, researchers have determined that the use of pre-workout supplements is linked with shorter sleep time among young adults. The study was published in Sleep Epidemiology, and it demonstrated that many teenagers power their workouts with pre-workout drinks, which often results in them feeling tired the next day. Sleep has a prime role in regulating mood, immunity, and muscle recovery but clear guidance is limited. More research is needed to understand timing, dose, and inadequate sleep in the real world. An online survey was conducted among individuals aged 16 to 30 years across Canada. The participants were drawn from Wave 2 of the Canadian Study of Adolescent Health Behavior. Pre-workout use in the initial 12 months was recorded as 'any' versus 'none', distinguished by the inclusion of behavioral and performance-enhancing additives. The average sleep over the previous two weeks was categorized into self-declared hour ranges: ≤5, 6, 7,8 or greater than 9. Meanwhile, the symptoms of depression and anxiety were measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire 9-Item (PHQ-9) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-Item (GAD-7), and any weight training in the initial 30 days was also recorded. The research study used a demographically diverse sample of girls, young women, boys, young men, transgender individuals. The model performed efficiently; furthermore, the incorporation of demographic variables, mental health symptoms, and pre-workout use emerged as a reliable indicator of very short sleep.

For kids, COVID infection is riskier than the vaccine

Patrick deHahn



With many parents still navigating new COVID-19 vaccine recommendations for children – and with most pediatric infections remaining mild – it can be hard to know what to do. But a growing body of research points to the same conclusion: COVID infection poses greater and longer-lasting health risks than vaccination does.

Providing some of the strongest data yet, researchers at University College London analyzed three years of health records for 14 million kids ages 1 and up, including 3.9 million diagnosed with COVID and 3.4 million who were vaccinated. The vaccine carried a small risk of heart inflammation or blood clots in the first month after immunization – but these events were very rare and short-lived, found the study, published in The Lancet. By contrast, COVID infections were linked to "rare but more frequent and longer-lasting" heart and blood vessel problems, sometimes lasting up to a year. COVID infection caused about two heart inflammation cases (compared to less than one tied to vaccination) for every 100,000 children, and 17 inflammatory post-infection conditions (compared to none tied to vaccination).

"Get out the message clearly, cleanly, and loudly: Unvaccinated kids are at higher-than-normal risk of bad cardiovascular outcomes if they catch COVID – and that risk continues for up to a year after infection," said New York City–based epidemiologist Maureen Miller, PhD, who was not involved in the study.

Beyond heart risks, research shows COVID can leave children with lingering health problems – another reason experts recommend vaccination.

Collapse of key Atlantic current could bring extreme drought to Europe for hundreds of years

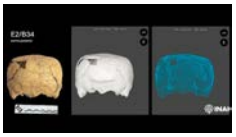
Sarah Wild

Southern Europe's already scorching dry summers could get even worse over the next 1,000 years if a key ocean current system collapses — with a rise in extreme droughts and longer dry seasons, a new study suggests. This is the first time that researchers have compared what would happen to Europe's summer precipitation under different climate scenarios if the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) were to collapse. The AMOC is a major ocean current system in the Atlantic Ocean that brings heat from the Southern Hemisphere to the Northern Hemisphere and helps regulate the climate globally. Scientists have previously warned that human-linked climate change is weakening the massive current system and could be pushing it to a tipping point. (Tipping points are thresholds in Earth's climate system.)

"The AMOC actually shapes our global climate system," René van Westen, lead author on the new paper and a postdoctoral researcher in marine and atmospheric science at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, told Live Science.

Unusual, 1,400-year-old cube-shaped human skull unearthed in Mexico

Kristina Killgrove



Archaeologists digging at a Mesoamerican site in Mexico have discovered an unusual, cube-shaped human skull. It is the first evidence that people in this area practiced a unique form of head-shaping, scientifically known as cranial modification, around 1,400 years ago.

The skull was unearthed near the archaeological site of Balcón de Montezuma (Balcony of Montezuma) in the east-central Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Various Mesoamerican ethnic groups lived in the area between 650 B.C. and A.D. 1200. Around A.D. 400, a village sprang up, eventually encompassing around 90 circular houses in two plazas, according to the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

In a recent review of artifacts and bones discovered at Balcón de Montezuma, researchers noticed that the skull of a middle-aged man was a shape they'd never seen before. In a translated INAH statement, biological anthropologist Jesús Ernesto Velasco González explained that, while artificially modified skulls have been discovered in the area before, the shape of this man's skull is unique.

Many people are familiar with cultures that practiced cone-shaped cranial modification, as these skulls have an almost "alien" appearance. Those skull shapes were typically created by using lengths of fabric or soft padding to "bind" the heads of infants and encourage the skull to grow in an "oblique" direction, and they appear elongated. Most of the modified skulls from Balcón de Montezuma, meanwhile, are shaped in an "erect" direction by placing soft padding on the back and/or front of the skull, causing the person to have a more upright or pointy head.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