Corruption: achilles' heel of Pakistan's economy - Page 5

High taxes, low reform - Page 6

Fiscal discipline or fiscal illusion? - Page 7

WEEKLY
Cutting Edge
INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE • ANALYTICAL

IMF DEPENDENCY: SHORT-TERM STABILITY, LONG-TERM PAIN

weeklycuttingedge.com CPL # 109 16-22 December 2025 Vol# 21 Issue # 5 Rs. 100

آج بھی فیورٹ
Treet
A Treet FOR YOUR FACE
New
Treet
A Treet FOR YOUR FACE
Treet
WHITE CARBON STEEL DOUBLE EDGE BLADE
Pakistan Standards
/Treet.grooming

Index | CUTTING EDGE

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 dependency: Short-term stability, long-term pain

Farhan Khan

Pakistan has been dealing with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for many decades, but a fundamental question persists: has this prolonged partnership truly served the long-term interests of the country's economy?

Recently, the IMF Executive Board completed the second review of Pakistan's Extended Fund Facility, approving the release of about US$1.2 billion, including US$200 million under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility. In its assessment, the Fund praised Pakistan's strong fiscal performance. What remained largely unsaid, however, is the heavy price paid by the formal sector, which has been subjected to near-extortionist tax rates. From the IMF's standpoint, meeting revenue targets appears to matter far more than broadening the tax base or curbing wasteful and unproductive expenditure.

As is evident, GDP growth has dwindled and the overall economy remains stagnant. The energy sector continues to be the weakest link in the economic chain, yet the IMF, instead of insisting on deep-rooted governance and efficiency reforms, has persistently pushed for repeated tariff hikes. This rising burden has effectively broken the back of the common consumer. Owing to harsh IMF conditionalities, poverty has increased, investment has shrunk, and capital flight from the country has accelerated.

According to many experts, Pakistan has been subjected to unusually tough IMF conditions since 2019, which have created serious domestic and external imbalances, ultimately unhinging the economy. A close analysis of the IMF's approach shows that while it has helped achieve short-term stability, long-term structural challenges have remained largely unaddressed. The overriding focus has been on averting immediate balance-of-payments crises and achieving macroeconomic stability, with little attention paid to mounting external debt, persistently high inflation, economic contraction, and widespread hardship caused by stringent conditionalities.

Undeniably, IMF programmes have provided much-needed foreign exchange support, with reserves reaching $14.5 billion by the end of FY2025, helping avert balance-of-payments crises and stabilise the currency against external shocks. Conditionalities have also resulted in improved tax collection, with FBR net provisional tax receipts rising by 30.8 percent during July–May FY2024, and the achievement of a primary fiscal surplus of 1.3 percent of GDP in FY2025, thereby strengthening public finances. IMF approval has unlocked additional financing from international partners and improved market confidence, as reflected in credit rating upgrades and declining sovereign spreads. Moreover, IMF programmes have sought to push reforms in areas such as the energy sector, circular debt reduction, state-owned enterprises, and governance, all of which are vital for long-term economic health. Under IMF pressure, through a combination of fiscal tightening and import compression, Pakistan also achieved its first current account surplus in 14 years in FY2025.

Yet, simultaneously, the economy has suffered severe damage in critical sectors, while poverty and unemployment have continued to rise. One of the most significant costs of IMF engagement has been the steady increase in foreign debt and the associated debt-servicing burden. This persistent problem, despite repeated IMF programmes, has continued to stifle national economic growth. IMF-mandated austerity measures, including sharp tax increases and the withdrawal of subsidies, have historically fuelled high inflation—averaging 23.4 percent in FY2024 before easing in FY2025—and slowed GDP growth, which even contracted in FY2023. These measures have disproportionately affected ordinary citizens, with inflation completely disrupting household budgets and pushing millions further below the poverty line.

Currency devaluation is another sensitive issue arising from IMF conditionalities. A market-determined exchange rate, while theoretically aimed at improving competitiveness, has at times resulted in sharp depreciation of the rupee. This has raised import costs, driven up overall prices, and significantly increased the cost of industrial production, rendering Pakistani goods less competitive in global markets.

Furthermore, IMF conditionalities have curtailed the government's ability to frame and pursue independent economic policies. The Fund's influence now extends into sensitive domestic sectors such as sugar, power, and even the operational functioning of the FBR. Consequently, successive governments find themselves constrained in rolling out relief measures to ease the burden on the common man or reduce prices.

Despite temporary macroeconomic stability, private investment remains weak due to tight monetary policies and persistently high interest rates, with the six-month Treasury bill rate touching 21.5 percent in FY2024. This has severely hampered sustainable job creation and long-term growth. According to a World Bank report, nearly 50 percent of Pakistan's population now lives below the poverty line, while unemployment has reached alarming levels. Rising taxes have eroded profitability in the manufacturing sector, and several well-known multinational companies operating in Pakistan have either suspended operations or exited the country altogether.

Economists increasingly argue that the time has come to honestly assess the bitter outcomes of decades-long dependence on the IMF and to shift focus toward developing indigenous resources and solutions to Pakistan's economic challenges. Experiences from countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America clearly demonstrate that excessive foreign debt can never be a path to sustainable economic progress. The IMF often resembles an addiction, compelling developing countries to take new loans merely to service old ones, with no durable relief in sight. Learning from global examples, Pakistan must revise its current approach and, by freeing itself from the clutches of perpetual IMF dependence, work toward homegrown and self-reliant solutions for lasting economic stability.

Corruption: achilles’ heel of Pakistan’s economy

Nasim Ahmed

Two recent reports have highlighted how corruption is steadily destroying Pakistan’s economy by depriving the majority of citizens of their legitimate economic and social rights. Transparency International and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have separately examined this issue in press releases issued a few weeks ago, painting a grim picture of governance failure in the country.

The annual survey released by Transparency International Pakistan (TIP) reveals that corruption has taken deep and firm roots across multiple sectors of society, most notably the police, procurement departments, and the judiciary. As is well known, TIP’s National Corruption Perception Survey is designed to gauge public perceptions regarding bribery and corruption encountered in everyday life.

According to the survey findings, over 24 percent of the 4,000 respondents identified the police as the most corrupt department, particularly in Punjab. It is worth noting that the police have consistently ranked as the most corrupt institution in previous TIP surveys as well. The judiciary ranked third on the corruption scale, as identified by 14 percent of respondents, with the highest perception of judicial corruption reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 18 percent.

The survey further reveals that nearly 77 percent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the government’s efforts to curb corruption. In this regard, the highest incidence of bribery related to access to public services was recorded in Sindh, where 46 percent of respondents reported being forced to pay bribes. The corresponding figures were 39 percent in Punjab and 20 percent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Moreover, 59 percent of respondents believed that provincial governments were more corrupt than local governments. This perception was particularly strong in Punjab (70 percent), followed by Balochistan (58 percent), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (55 percent), and Sindh (54 percent).

The survey also highlighted widespread corruption in the health sector, where a majority of respondents (67 percent) believed that corrupt and unethical practices posed a serious threat to the lives of ordinary citizens. This perception was highest in Sindh at 69 percent, followed closely by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 68 percent, Balochistan at 67 percent, and Punjab at 63 percent. Hospitals, doctors, and pharmaceutical companies were all cited as being involved in various malpractices.

Another damning assessment comes from the IMF, which has identified corruption as a central cause of Pakistan’s economic crisis, driven largely by elite capture. According to the IMF, state policies are frequently designed to benefit a narrow circle of political and business elites, while state institutions remain dysfunctional and unable to enforce the rule of law or protect public resources.

The IMF report estimates that “elite privilege”—defined as preferential access to subsidies, tax exemptions, and lucrative state contracts for a select few—drains billions of dollars from the economy each year. In addition, widespread tax evasion and regulatory capture discourage genuine private-sector investment. These findings echo a 2021 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, which estimated that economic privileges enjoyed by Pakistan’s elite groups, including politicians and the powerful military, amount to nearly six percent of the national economy. Entrenched interests, the report notes, shape rules and institutions to preserve their unfair advantages.

The IMF further points out that tax expenditures, including exemptions and concessions granted to influential sectors such as real estate, manufacturing, and energy, cost the state 4.61 percent of GDP in the 2023 fiscal year alone. Unsurprisingly, Pakistan continues to rank near the bottom of global governance indicators. Between 2015 and 2024, the country’s score on control of corruption remained largely stagnant, placing it among the worst-performing countries globally and within its region.

The report warns that without dismantling entrenched structures of elite privilege, meaningful economic reform will remain impossible. It states that “the most economically damaging manifestations involve privileged entities that exert influence over key economic sectors, including those owned by or affiliated with the state.” At the same time, the IMF emphasises that Pakistan could reap substantial economic benefits if governance improves and accountability mechanisms are strengthened. The report estimates that comprehensive governance reforms implemented over five years could raise GDP growth by 5 to 6.5 percent.

In Pakistan, corruption flourishes due to multiple factors, including weak accountability, lack of transparency, limited access to information, and prolonged delays in the adjudication of corruption cases. Anti-corruption institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) have largely failed to perform their mandated roles. Public perception strongly suggests a lack of transparency in investigations, absence of independent oversight, and frequent misuse of anti-corruption laws for political victimisation.

Experts argue that beyond strengthening accountability mechanisms at all levels, parliament must enact laws to limit the discretionary powers of state officials and further reinforce right-to-information legislation. At the same time, stronger legal protection must be provided to whistleblowers and individuals who report illegal and unethical practices within government institutions.

Ultimately, corruption in Pakistan—manifested through elite capture of markets, regulatory bodies, and public policy—is deeply political in nature and cannot be eliminated without broader structural and societal reforms. This challenge calls for sustained public awareness campaigns, coupled with exemplary punishment for corrupt officials who sacrifice the public interest for personal gain.

High taxes, low reform

Muhammad Ali

As Pakistan grapples with slowing growth, widening fiscal gaps, and an IMF programme that leaves little room to breathe, a fresh debate has resurfaced over whether the country is taxing its economy into stagnation.

An ambitious Rs975 billion tax relief proposal floated by a private-sector working group—and cautiously entertained by the Prime Minister—has exposed the core contradiction of Pakistan's fiscal strategy: the need to revive investment and formal economic activity while remaining shackled to rigid revenue targets. With the Federal Board of Revenue already falling well short of its FY26 goals, the prospect of relief has ignited a broader reckoning over whether Pakistan's tax structure is sustainable—or self-defeating.

In early December, as Pakistan's economy limps through FY26 with a widening revenue shortfall, a private-sector-led working group floated an ambitious Rs975 billion tax relief package, prompting Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to direct officials to engage the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for approval. This proposal—encompassing cuts for salaried workers, corporate rate reductions, super tax withdrawal, and surcharge abolition—arrives amid dire fiscal straits. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has missed its July-November target by Rs428 billion (8 percent shortfall), signaling deepening collection woes. With the IMF's Extended Fund Facility demanding unwavering revenue targets, mid-year relief appears improbable at best, relegating any concessions to FY27 deliberations—if offset by expenditure cuts. This episode highlights a broader malaise: excessively high, skewed taxes deterring investment and formal activity, yet reforms stalled by structural rigidities and enforcement gaps.

The private-sector panel's blueprint addresses longstanding grievances. Corporate income tax at 29 percent, augmented by a 10 percent super tax on high earners (effective burdens exceeding 60 percent in layered cases), and dividend taxation at 15 percent—even inter-corporate—stifle capital formation. Business leaders lament insufficient incentives for reinvestment, as major groups eye offshore opportunities. Salaried individuals face a top slab of 35 percent plus 10 percent surcharge beyond thresholds, fueling middle-class exodus: skilled managers emigrate or shift to freelancing, slashing liabilities amid a mid-to-senior talent crunch in formal sectors.

These distortions breed informality's rise. Export services, including freelancing, enjoy a mere 1 percent final tax, contrasting 29 percent on goods—prompting reports of goods rerouted as services, inflating the former while the latter stagnates. High rates disincentivize consumption and investment, with government spending skewed toward inefficient current outlays yielding poor governance outcomes. After two years of IMF-driven austerity, realization dawns: the model falters. The Prime Minister's remarks on slashing income and sales taxes to curb capital flight, echoed by the Special Investment Facilitation Council coordinator, reflect this shift.

Yet, intent clashes with reality. However, IMF does not affirm mid-year relaxation, especially with FBR's Rs428 billion hole threatening primary surplus targets. At best,

waivers for shortfalls might avert contingency hikes in H2FY26, but relief demands offsets—likely via deeper development cuts, perpetuating growth's sacrifice. Phasing over years, as suggested, could align with FY27 budgeting, but requires demonstrating base expansion and expenditure restraint.

FBR's track-and-trace initiatives offer glimmers: over Rs52 billion additional from sugar and cement via AI monitoring in late 2024-2025, with plans for textiles, tobacco, and tiles. Chairman claims competent placements in key posts, yet widening gaps belie progress. New filers often contribute minimally, underscoring enforcement's limits against informality.

The core impediment: lack of imagination in downsizing government. Rightsizing vacant posts saves Rs56 billion annually, but redundant active roles persist. SOE losses exceed Rs500 billion yearly; privatization crawls. Without slashing current expenditures—pensions, bureaucracy perks—by Rs1-2 trillion through bold reforms, tax cuts remain illusory.

High taxation's toll is multifaceted. Investment at 13 percent of GDP lags regional 30 percent averages, FDI tepid at 0.7 percent. Exports, 53 percent textiles, falter amid cotton shortages and energy costs double peers. Human capital flees: 335,000 emigrated H1 2025, remittances $35 billion notwithstanding global squeezes. Youth unemployment at 22 percent risks unrest in a 64 percent under-30 demographic.

The proposal's wisdom is evident: lower rates could spur formalization, investment, and growth, mirroring Bangladesh's garment boom or India's manufacturing incentives. Yet, without offsets—expenditure rationalization, SOE sales, elite taxation—IMF veto looms. The Rs975 billion package, bulk corporate-focused per analysts (salaried relief Rs30-40 billion), demands fiscal space Pakistan lacks mid-program.

As FY26 unfolds with deficits yawning and growth at 3 percent—insufficient for 2 million annual job seekers—the crossroads sharpens. Embrace comprehensive reform: digitize FBR for Rs2 trillion untapped, prune bureaucracy genuinely, privatize loss-makers. Or persist in patchwork, inviting the 25th bailout. For a nation rich in youth and potential, high taxes' drag isn't sustainable. The private-sector push signals urgency; government's response will define if relief materializes—or evaporates into another wish list. Amid IMF oversight, true relief demands courage: shrink the state to enlarge the economy.

The Rs975 billion tax relief proposal is less a fiscal wishlist than a warning signal. Pakistan's economy cannot grow, formalize, or retain talent under a tax regime that penalizes productivity while shielding inefficiency. Yet without decisive expenditure reform—curbing bloated bureaucracy, halting SOE hemorrhages, and rationalizing pensions—meaningful relief remains fiscally impossible under IMF oversight. As FY26 unfolds with subpar growth and mounting social pressures, Pakistan faces a stark choice: undertake courageous, structural reform that shrinks the state and widens the tax base, or continue cosmetic fixes that merely postpone the next bailout. The private sector has sounded the alarm; whether the state listens will determine if relief becomes policy—or fades into another missed opportunity.

Fiscal discipline or fiscal illusion?

Husnain Shahid

In an era where Pakistan's economy teeters under the weight of IMF conditions, soaring debt, and stagnant growth, the government's repeated assertions of fiscal discipline ring increasingly hollow.

Recent data from the Ministry of Finance exposes a troubling paradox: federal civil administration and pension expenditures have surged unabated over the past five years, defying austerity drives that typically target pro-poor subsidies, development projects, and vulnerable sectors. The July-September quarter of FY26 saw a 13 percent jump in government running costs to Rs161.2 billion, even as rightsizing initiatives eliminated over 54,000 vacant posts—projected to yield Rs56 billion in annual savings. This escalation, coupled with a 125 percent spike in legacy pension payouts since Q1 FY22, reveals not transient blips but profound structural rigidities. As debt servicing consumes nearly half of revenues and development spending faces routine deferrals, these unchecked overheads threaten to perpetuate deficits, erode credibility with lenders, and stifle the transformative growth Pakistan desperately needs.

The trajectory of these expenditures paints a damning picture of institutional inertia. Civil administrative costs have ballooned nearly 80 percent from Rs89.5 billion in Q1 FY22, shrugging off mergers of ministries, departmental rationalizations, and cumulative job cuts exceeding 200,000 positions in recent years. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has positioned these measures as cornerstones of efficiency, yet the persistent upward march—amid a sixfold increase in subsidy disbursements to Rs120 billion in the same quarter—suggests superficial reforms failing against entrenched bloat. Pensions, ranking as the fourth-largest budgetary line after debt, defense, and development, exemplify delayed reckoning. The 2025 reforms, transitioning new civilian entrants to contributory schemes (10 percent employee, 20 percent government contributions from mid-2024, extended to armed forces in 2025), promise long-term sustainability but leave a massive legacy burden intact. A 7 percent pension increase effective July 2025 further inflates obligations, ensuring that relief remains generational rather than immediate.

This relentless growth occurs against a backdrop of acute financial pressure. With public debt exceeding Rs82 trillion and external obligations demanding rollovers, the center's fiscal space shrinks annually. Development allocations, vital for infrastructure and human capital, are habitually slashed midyear—often by 20-30 percent—to accommodate overruns, shaving potential GDP growth by 0.5 percentage points in FY25 alone, according to independent assessments. Pro-poor subsidies, from energy relief to social protection, bear the brunt of "austerity," while core administrative and pension lines expand unchecked. This selective restraint not only exacerbates inequality—42 percent poverty and 40 percent child stunting persist—but also undermines the IMF's Extended Fund Facility mandates for prudent expenditure management.

Successive administrations have deflected blame onto the 7th National Finance Commission (NFC) Award of 2011, which elevated provincial shares in the divisible pool to 57.5 percent. A recent Planning Ministry analysis reinforces this grievance, asserting that federal deficits averaged 7 percent of GDP post-Award, compared to 4 percent previously, as diminished central resources strained debt servicing, defense, and national obligations. To offset this, Islamabad has imposed hefty petroleum and gas development levies—generating billions annually—while contemplating clawbacks of devolved funds or shifting expenditure loads, such as health and education, back to provinces.

This scapegoating, however, masks self-inflicted vulnerabilities. Provinces have adeptly utilized enhanced transfers post-18th Amendment, achieving surpluses and advancements in devolved domains like primary healthcare and schooling. The federal deficit's persistence owes more to internal failings: reluctance to downsize a bloated bureaucracy, retention of duplicative ministries despite constitutional devolution, and pension systems bloated by early retirements and unchecked indexation. Tax policy distortions—exemptions costing 4.61 percent of GDP shielding real estate barons, agricultural elites, and retailers—compound the issue, keeping the tax-to-GDP ratio stagnant at 10.3 percent while compliant salaried classes and formal firms shoulder escalating burdens.

A sustainable resolution demands a paradigm shift beyond symbolic gestures. Rightsizing must penetrate active redundancies, not merely vacant slots: merge or abolish 10-15 overlapping ministries, streamline a civil service hierarchy notorious for layers and perks. Pension legacies require bolder interventions—phased benefit reductions for high earners, mandatory retirement age enforcement, and accelerated contributory migration to curb annual 20-25 percent growth. State-owned enterprise privatization, long promised yet stalled, could halt hemorrhages exceeding Rs500 billion yearly, redirecting savings to productive avenues.

Tax reforms are equally imperative: digitize enforcement to capture Rs2-3 trillion from the informal sector, phase out exemptions equitably, and target a tax-to-GDP ascent to 18-20 percent through broadened nets rather than regressive hikes. Provincial cooperation, not confrontation, could unlock synergies—shared revenue from urban immovable property taxes or agricultural income levies—while upholding NFC equity.

Clinging to NFC revision fantasies or piecemeal cuts offers illusory escape. As global borrowing costs rise and domestic investment languishes at 13 percent of GDP, structural bloat risks perpetual crises: higher taxes on the squeezed middle, deferred development starving growth, and eroded lender trust inviting harsher IMF terms. The 13 percent Q1 surge isn't anomaly—it's symptom of a system prioritizing preservation over progress.

Pakistan stands at a fiscal inflection: confront institutional excesses with unflinching resolve, or perpetuate a cycle where austerity burdens the vulnerable while overheads thrive. With a youthful populace demanding jobs and services, the choice is existential—reform the core, or watch deficits devour the future. True discipline isn't selective sacrifice; it's systemic renewal, ensuring every rupee serves the nation's ascent, not its apparatus.

Pakistan's cycle of missed targets and painful fixes

Shahid Hussain

The International Monetary Fund is satisfied with the economic performance of Pakistan but beneath measured praise for macroeconomic resilience lies a stark revelation: the nation remains ensnared in a familiar pattern of missed benchmarks, eleventh-hour concessions, and growth-sapping austerity.

The IMF has released its staff report following the approval of the second review under the $7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and the first under the $1.4 billion Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF), Pakistan secured another vital lifeline. The combined $1.2 billion disbursement brought total inflows to $3.3 billion, offering temporary respite amid lingering flood scars and fiscal strains.

Having faltered on 11 prior targets, Islamabad obtained waivers in exchange for a raft of new commitments, underscoring the steep price of continued support in its 24th IMF program. This latest chapter exemplifies the trade-offs inherent in Pakistan's prolonged dependence on external financing. To plug a Rs104 billion shortfall from the captive power levy, the government pledged to slash electricity subsidies—a move that will likely cascade higher tariffs onto industries and households already grappling with costs double those of regional competitors.

More alarmingly, a Rs430 billion revenue hole in the first five months of FY26 prompted assurances of fresh taxes on pesticides, fertilizers, and premium sugary products. These levies, while aimed at broadening the base, risk inflating agricultural input costs and food prices, threatening yields already battered by climate shocks and exacerbating the 40 percent child malnutrition crisis.

At the core of these fiscal firefights lies the Federal Board of Revenue's enduring underperformance. Despite ramped-up enforcement on salaried workers and formal businesses—manifest in soaring withholding deductions and audits—collections fell short by Rs428-430 billion in July-November. This gap exposes a deeply skewed tax regime: exemptions and concessions, devouring 4.61 percent of GDP, cocoon influential sectors like real estate, agriculture, and retail, while the informal economy—encompassing 60 percent of activity—largely evades scrutiny. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's contingency plan to defer expenditures amid potential National Tariff Policy fallout revives a decades-old ritual: mid-year development slashes of 20-30 percent, diverting funds from infrastructure and social initiatives that could ignite higher growth. Independent analyses suggest such cuts trimmed 0.5 percent from FY25's potential, reinforcing consumption-driven fragility over productive investment.

Power sector overhauls highlight the concessions' sting. Circular debt at Rs2.5 trillion necessitates urgent privatization, with first-round DISCO bidding slated for early 2026 and preparatory work for Hyderabad and Sukkur entities by year-end. Governance vows—disclosing senior bureaucrats' assets by December 2026 and modernizing SOE legislation by August—seek to stem leakages, yet mirror repeatedly deferred promises, fueling doubts about execution.

Longer-term signals are equally disconcerting. Phasing out incentives for Special Economic Zones and Export Processing Zones by 2035—shifting from profit-based to cost-focused perks—threatens to chill foreign direct investment, already languishing at 0.7 percent of GDP against India's 2 percent. Pre-pandemic, these zones attracted $2-3 billion annually; their dilution could further deter inflows amid tepid exports, down 6 percent in early FY26. Coupled with farm input taxes, these policies imperil agricultural resilience, with key crop outputs declining 3-6 percent in 2025 due to floods costing $7 billion in damages.

The IMF's narrative reaffirms Pakistan's boom-bust affliction: stimulus-fueled demand outstrips supply, ballooning deficits and eroding reserves, while opaque subsidies entrench inefficiency in low-productivity enclaves. Despite FY25's rare current account surplus and reserves rebuilt to $14.5 billion, FY26's early reversal signals persistent vulnerability. Growth projections, downgraded to 3.0-3.5 percent amid shocks, fall short of the 6 percent threshold for meaningful job absorption—critical with 2 million youth entering the workforce yearly—or halving 42 percent poverty.

This 37-month engagement, extending to 2027, affords breathing room but at austerity's expense. The RSF's emphasis on climate adaptation—disaster coordination and water reforms—tackles acute risks, yet lags in delivery. Waivers for lapsed targets show pragmatism, but the addition of 11 new conditions swells the benchmark tally beyond 60, straining political bandwidth.

Escaping this treadmill demands audacity beyond mere compliance. Equitably widen the net: FBR digitization could unlock Rs2 trillion from retailers and agriculture. Channel subsidy savings—Rs500 billion yearly—into export incentives, trimming energy to 8-9 cents/kWh and lending rates to 10 percent. Expedite DISCO transfers with independent boards targeting 20 percent loss cuts. Domestic resolve—Rs1 trillion current expenditure reductions via pension and luxury reforms—might dilute IMF sway, nurturing true ownership.

Pakistan boasts formidable strengths: a 241 million population, 64 percent under 30; strategic geography; $35 billion remittances. Yet, ensnared in low-growth stasis—with debt servicing gobbling half revenues and investment at 13 percent of GDP—the risk of perpetual bailouts looms. This $1.2 billion tranche stabilizes; frittering it on stopgaps courts the 25th program. As leaders steer these compromises, the fork ahead is unmistakable: champion transformative fairness, or settle for stabilization's limbo. For citizens battling outages, inflation, and insecurity, the outcome isn't fiscal jargon—it's the blueprint for a dignified tomorrow.

Pakistan's unfinished war against extremism and terrorism

Raza Khan

In recent times, particularly during the current year, Pakistan has faced massive terrorist attacks across two of its key provinces as well as the federal capital, Islamabad, compelling the country's strategists to revisit and rethink existing counterterrorism strategies.

Terrorist groups, particularly those designated by the state as Fitna-ul-Khawarij or the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), along with Baloch separatist insurgent groups labelled as Fitna-tul-Hindustan (India-created rebels), have been wreaking havoc in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan respectively, claiming the lives of hundreds of civilians and security forces personnel. As a result, the country's strategists—whether from the political arena or the military—have quite rightly identified the urgent need to implement the National Action Plan (NAP) in both letter and spirit. There is no doubt that the NAP, as a national policy to counter violent extremism and terrorism, remains the most comprehensively formulated document. Without implementing its 20 points in totality, no real or meaningful progress in eliminating the twin menaces of extremism and terrorism can be achieved. However, the most important question remains: how should its 20 points be implemented in practice?

It must be recalled that the NAP was framed unanimously by the entire political leadership of Pakistan in the aftermath of the heinous Army Public School terrorist attack in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, with the objective of decisively countering extremism and terrorism in the country.

As far as two significant points of the NAP—namely the execution of convicted terrorists and the formation of speedy courts to try those accused of terrorism—are concerned, there has been some encouraging implementation in the past, but it has not proved sufficient. Another key point of the NAP, which calls for ensuring that no armed militia can function in the country, requires a holistic and integrated policy, as mere declarations are not enough. Such a policy must combine the outlawing of militias, effective legal action against them, and the use of robust military and police force to physically and forcefully prevent their operations. Moreover, the overall strategy must blend physical, psychological, and economic measures to dismantle armed militias. Strengthening the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), as envisaged under the NAP, can be achieved by inducting and consulting subject experts and credible analysts with strong backgrounds in terrorism and security studies.

The fifth point of the NAP, which deals with countering hate speech and extremist material, has suffered from weak and inconsistent implementation and has lacked the boldness required from the government. The state must ruthlessly and indiscriminately enforce the existing ban on the use of loudspeakers installed in mosques for any purpose other than the call to prayer (Azan). Furthermore, the government must crack down on all printed, broadcast, and online material, including internet sites, through which extremists and terrorists spread propaganda and secure recruits, finances, and sympathizers. The NAP also calls for choking the financial resources of terrorists. In this regard, government agencies must identify the vast business networks and commercial complexes established by extremist and terrorist groups, which serve as their primary sources of funding. Although authorities possess substantial data on this issue, action to forfeit such assets has remained negligible. While some concrete steps have been taken to curb illegal Hundi and Hawala money transfer systems, many networks involved in these transactions continue to operate with impunity, a matter that requires serious and immediate attention.

Another point of the NAP calls for ensuring that proscribed organizations do not re-emerge. This, again, is fundamentally a question of the government's commitment to its stated counterterrorism objectives. Otherwise, it is well known how banned organizations resurface under new names and altered identities.

The ninth point of the NAP, which focuses on taking effective steps against religious persecution, could be implemented by banning all sources of unofficial fatwas (religious edicts) and revamping the existing government-funded system of district and provincial muftis and khateebs.

Arguably, one of the most critical points of the NAP relates to the registration and regulation of madrassas. Given their physical presence, their historical linkage with religious extremism, and, above all, the occurrence of the unspeakably horrific Peshawar school massacre in 2014, regulating and registering madrassas should have been relatively straightforward. However, successive governments—the PML-N, followed by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and the current ruling coalition of PML-N, PPP, MQM and others in power since April 2022—have failed to fully capitalize on this opportunity. Even now, the way forward lies in regulating madrassa affairs without fear of political backlash or public pressure.

The NAP point regarding administrative and development reforms in the erstwhile FATA, now merged tribal districts (MTDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with particular emphasis on the return and rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (IDPs), carries immense significance. Although FATA has been merged with KP, the move has paradoxically generated new conflicts and grievances. This situation requires urgent and serious review; otherwise, continued instability in the former tribal areas will keep feeding extremism and terrorism across Pakistan. If the merger framework is not delivering desired outcomes, alternative arrangements—including the option of de-merging the MTDs—may need to be thoughtfully considered.

The NAP also calls for tangible measures against the abuse of the internet and social media for terrorist purposes. This is entirely feasible but has not been implemented with consistency and resolve. The pertinent question is: if the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) can effectively block YouTube and thousands of pornographic websites, why can it not block platforms used by extremists and terrorists?

The 15th point of the NAP, which emphasizes zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab, is of fundamental importance. For much of the past few decades, Punjab has been governed by the PML-N, yet the threat posed by extremist and terrorist outfits could not be decisively neutralized due to an evident lack of political will. This issue must be addressed immediately by the powers that be.

The NAP provision regarding taking the Karachi operation to its logical conclusion has been implemented to a considerable extent, which is indeed commendable. However, sustained vigilance is required to ensure that militant wings within political parties such as the PPP, Jamaat-e-Islami, ANP, and MQM—each of which has had militant or armed factions in the past—do not re-emerge.

The 18th point, which calls for firm action against sectarian terrorists, could have been relatively easier to implement if all mosques and Imambargahs owned or controlled by sectarian organizations had been placed under direct government supervision. This remains the most viable way forward.

Finally, the NAP provision concerning the formulation of a comprehensive policy to address the issue of Afghan refugees has seen some progress, but much more remains to be done. Since July this year, no Afghan national residing in Pakistan without a valid visa has any legal standing; therefore, such individuals must be repatriated without further delay in accordance with the law.

Ghalib's universality and Pakistan

Faheem Amir

Man, irrespective of colour, creed, or country, shares the same fundamental nature. His emotions, passions, and the unending urge to gratify desire are universal, as is his longing to create a peaceful and happy society. Across cultures, he aspires towards idealism, humanitarianism, moral virtue, and rationality. Yet within him coexist opposing forces: the pull of goodness and the temptation of evil, the urge to rise above animalistic instincts and the impulse to surrender to them.

It is this inner conflict that defines the complexity of the human condition. A great writer does not conceal these contradictions behind religion, dogma, moral certainty, or social convention; rather, he unmasks them with courage and honesty. Through a fearless exploration of desire, doubt, love, hate, jealousy, greed, lust, faith, and rebellion, great literature reveals what humanity often hesitates to acknowledge—that man is neither wholly noble nor wholly corrupt, but perpetually divided within himself.

All great writers such as Ghalib, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Thomas Hardy unveil these universal human struggles and complexities. Their works do not speak merely to a particular nation or a specific historical moment; instead, they address the shared inner life of mankind. By exposing the tensions between desire and restraint, faith and doubt, reason and passion, they remind us that the deepest truths of human existence are universal, timeless, and enduring.

Ghalib's greatness does not rest solely on his mastery of language or the sensual brilliance of his metaphors, but on his uncompromising exploration of the inner life of man. He enters the most private chambers of human consciousness—desire, doubt, contradiction, longing, and uncertainty—and gives them honest and realistic expression, even when such realism unsettles religious, moral, or philosophical certainties.

Ghalib beautifully captures the dilemma of human nature in the following verse:

Janta huñ sawab-e-ta at-o-zuhd Par tabi at udhar nahiñ ati

("I know the reward of obedience and piety, but my nature does not incline that way.")

Here, Ghalib acknowledges religious truth at the level of intellect but confesses that the heart does not always submit to reason. Through this couplet, he suggests that human behaviour is often governed more by inclination and desire than by moral knowledge alone. It is a candid admission of the gap between what man knows and how he lives.

Thomas Hardy presents the same reality in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* through the character of Angel Clare. Angel intellectually rejects rigid social morality and recognises Tess's essential innocence; yet when confronted with her past, his emotional instincts and ingrained social conditioning overpower his ethical understanding. Despite knowing what is morally right, he fails to act accordingly. Hardy, like Ghalib, thus demonstrates that moral awareness does not necessarily control human conduct, and that inner conflict and inclination frequently prevail over reason and ideals.

In another famous couplet, Ghalib writes:

Hum ko ma lum hai jannat ki haqiqat lekin Dil ke khush rakhne ko yeh khayal achch hai

("We know the reality of Paradise, but to keep the heart content, this belief is comforting.")

This verse does not reflect atheism. Rather, Ghalib explains why people believe in religion. He suggests that such beliefs offer emotional solace in the face of suffering, mortality, and existential uncertainty. Ghalib does not reject faith; instead, he questions its psychological and social function in human life. Later thinkers such as Marx and Freud would articulate similar ideas, describing religion as a human response to fear, alienation, suffering, and insecurity.

Human life, according to Ghalib, is bound to infinite desire (khwahish). This should not be dismissed merely as human weakness; rather, it is a defining condition of existence. The fulfilment of desire does not extinguish longing but often gives birth to further cravings. Ghalib expresses this truth in his most celebrated couplet:

Hazaroñ khvahishe aisi ki har khvahish pe dam nikle
Bahut nikle mere arman lekin phir bhi kam nikle

("Thousands of desires, each one worth dying for; many of my wishes were fulfilled, yet they still seemed too few.")

Here, Ghalib suggests that even satisfied desires leave an emptiness behind. Human existence, therefore, remains incomplete and perpetually unfinished. To be alive, for Ghalib, is to desire endlessly—often beyond reason and restraint. This understanding challenges simplistic moral binaries, for if desire is limitless, piety alone can never fully complete a human being.

Ghalib further implies that man should be allowed to live according to his inner wishes and inclinations, free from rigid moral compulsion imposed externally. He values authenticity of feeling over enforced restraint. This idea is reflected in the following couplet:

Go hath mein jumbish nahin, aankhon mein to dum hai
Rahne do abhi sagar-o-meena, mere aage

("Though the hands can no longer move, the eyes still live;
let the wine and goblet remain before me.")

In this verse, Ghalib expresses the persistence of desire and consciousness even in weakness and decline. This is not crude pleasure-seeking, but a refusal to surrender prematurely to death. The wine and goblet symbolise awareness, presence, and engagement with life. As long as consciousness exists, the world continues to matter. Ghalib thus affirms the human right to longing and enjoyment as long as life endures, challenging moral systems that suppress human feeling instead of understanding it. In this sense, his thought anticipates modernism, rejects extremism, and critiques rigid moral and religious dogmatism.

Ghalib also holds that human life is inherently flawed and burdened with imperfection, and that only death finally conceals these shortcomings. He suggests that the restless flame of desire can be extinguished only by death. This painful truth is expressed in the following verse:

Dhañpa kafan ne dagh-e-uyub-e-barahnagi
Main varna har libas meñ nañg-e-vajud tha

("The shroud concealed the flaws and shame of my naked existence; otherwise, in every garment, my very being was a disgrace.")

If Pakistan aspires to become a modern, stable, and democratic state, it must embrace the spirit of Ghalib's thought, which promotes rationalism, moderation, tolerance, and self-awareness. The country's challenges—religious extremism, intolerance, political hypocrisy, and deep class divisions—cannot be resolved through dogma or coercion, but through understanding, compassion, and intellectual honesty. Ghalib's message does not weaken faith or morality; rather, it strengthens them by grounding them in empathy instead of fear. In this sense, following Ghalib is not merely a literary exercise, but a vital intellectual step towards national maturity and progress.

Unraveling the threads: Systemic exploitation in garment industry

Dr. Fatima Khan

In the bustling factories of Karachi and Lahore, where the hum of sewing machines echoes through dimly lit halls, millions of workers toil to clothe the world. Yet, behind the vibrant fabrics exported to global fashion giants lies a grim reality of exploitation, vulnerability, and silenced voices.

Amnesty International's recent report, "Stitched Up: Denial of Freedom of Association for Garment Workers in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka," shines a harsh light on this underbelly of the industry. Focusing on the denial of workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively, the report reveals how governments and corporations in South Asia perpetuate a system that leaves employees—particularly women—exposed to harassment, unsafe conditions, and economic precarity. In Pakistan, where the textile and garment sector forms the backbone of the economy, contributing 8.5% to GDP and over half of exports, these issues are not isolated incidents but structural flaws that undermine human dignity and sustainable growth. The garment industry in Pakistan employs around two million people directly, with countless more in informal supply chains. However, approximately 75% of these workers operate in the shadows of informality, lacking legal protections, written contracts, or access to social security. This precarity manifests in poverty-level wages, with more than a third of surveyed workers earning less than Rs25,000 (about USD 90) per month—far below the estimated living wage of USD 279.95 (Rs67,200). Factories often exploit loopholes by shifting workers to piece-rate systems after minimum wage hikes, effectively slashing earnings while evading regulations like the Sindh Factories Act 2015, which bans contract labor for core production roles. Coerced overtime is rampant, with shifts stretching to 9-11 hours daily, and refusal met with threats of dismissal. Deductions for minor infractions, such as a few minutes of lateness, can wipe out hours of pay, trapping workers in cycles of debt and desperation.

Women, who make up only 28% of the garment workforce in Pakistan—a stark contrast to the majority-female labor forces in neighboring countries—bear the heaviest burden. This low participation rate mirrors Pakistan's overall female labor force involvement of about 22.6%, the lowest in South Asia. Many are rural migrants, often young and from marginalized communities, facing intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, caste, class, religion, and migration status. They are viewed as dispensable, relegated to insecure roles with lower pay—men earn 41% more per hour on average in the Asian garment sector, according to ILO data. Harassment is pervasive: verbal abuse, sexual intimidation, physical touching, and coerced overtime used as tools of control. One worker, pseudonymously named Sumaaiyaa, recounted enduring lifelong harassment, including demands for dates and dinners from supervisors, with complaints ignored or leading to demotion. Religious minorities, like Christians, are funneled into low-wage janitorial jobs, facing mandatory overtime and threats, as illustrated by Aisha's experience of having her ID withheld to enforce compliance.

Unsafe working conditions exacerbate these vulnerabilities. The 2022 Ali Enterprises factory fire in Karachi, which claimed over 250 lives, exemplifies the deadly consequences of neglected safety standards: illegal constructions, absent alarms and exits, and a complete lack of unions to advocate for improvements. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Export Processing Zones (EPZs) are particularly egregious, exempted from key labor laws like the Factories Act 1934 and Minimum Wages Ordinance 1961, leading to unchecked hazards and illnesses. Workers endure miserable environments—no washrooms during shifts, verbal abuse, and production pressures that have remained unchanged for decades. The absence of effective grievance mechanisms means abuses go unaddressed, fostering a culture of impunity.

At the heart of these problems is the denial of freedom of association. Unionization rates in Pakistan's garment sector are dismally low, at just 8% among surveyed workers, with about 80% of workplaces having no unions at all. Barriers are formidable: high thresholds for union certification (requiring over one-third of the workforce), arbitrary deregistrations, and corruption where officials leak member lists to employers. In EPZs, strikes are outright banned, and laws like the Industrial Relations Ordinance 1968 criminalize "illegal strikes." Employers deploy "yellow unions"—management-controlled entities—to block genuine organizing, often through bribery or threats. Workers attempting to unionize face dismissal, with all interviewed organizers reporting retaliation. This repression violates international standards, including ILO Conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and collective bargaining, which Pakistan has not fully ratified.

Comparisons with regional peers highlight Pakistan's unique challenges. In Bangladesh, unionization is even lower at 2.25%, marred by post-Rana Plaza yellow unions and violent crackdowns, including four deaths and 131 arrests in 2023 protests. India sees 5% unionization in ready-made garments, with SEZs exempting labor laws and worker committees supplanting independent unions. Sri Lanka fares slightly better at 9.5% overall, but Free Trade Zones (FTZs) restrict access and deploy military against protests. Across all four countries, women dominate the workforce except in Pakistan, yet face similar abuses: 81% in Bangladesh report sexual violence, while Sri Lankan workers endure ethnic threats and health risks from excessive targets. Informal employment is rampant—90% in India, high in Bangladesh's SEZs—fueling wage theft and precariousness.

This bleak landscape is corroborated by the 2025 ITUC Global Rights Index, which rates Pakistan a 5, the worst category, signifying "no guarantee of rights" due to systematic violations. Key issues include a Balochistan court declaring 62 unions unlawful, affecting millions of public sector workers, and restrictions on union registration and bargaining. In comparison, India and Bangladesh also score 5, while Sri Lanka is at 4 (systematic violations), against an Asia-Pacific average of 4.08. Pakistan's overall unionization hovers at 2-3%, far below what is needed for meaningful change, with governments viewing strong unions as threats to economic growth rather than partners in progress.

Addressing these entrenched issues requires bold action. Amnesty International urges the Pakistani government to ratify all 11 fundamental ILO conventions, adopt a non-discriminatory living wage, and resource labor inspections for thorough enforcement. Key reforms include repealing EPZ exemptions, implementing the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act with 2022 amendments, and revising laws that criminalize strikes under anti-terrorism provisions. Companies must respect workers' rights by providing transparent contracts, supporting independent unions, and enforcing zero-tolerance for discrimination through training and secure complaint mechanisms. Global fashion brands should conduct human rights due diligence, increase purchase prices to cover living wages, and avoid sourcing from non-unionized zones without remediation. Compliance is not just ethical—it's economic, as Pakistan's GSP+ status, granting preferential EU trade access, hinges on upholding labor rights, with renewal looming.

In conclusion, the garment workers of Pakistan are the unsung heroes sustaining a vital industry, yet they are stitched into a fabric of injustice that frays their lives and the nation's moral fiber. By heeding Amnesty's recommendations and fostering genuine worker empowerment, Pakistan can transform its workplaces into models of equity and resilience. This is not merely about rights; it's about building a sustainable economy where no one is left behind. Failure to act risks unraveling the progress made, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exploitation. The time for change is now—let the threads of reform bind a stronger, fairer future for all.

We now see the ugly face of Gaza's 'new normal'

Eman Abu Zayed

Winter came to Gaza last month with a violent storm. I woke up at night to a disaster. Our tent was flooded with water which had transformed our "floor" into a shallow pool. The mattresses and pillows were completely soaked, cooking pots were submerged, the clothes were drenched, and even our bags— which function as our "closets"—were filled with water. Nothing inside remained dry.

As I tried to understand what was happening, I suddenly heard children crying at the entrance of our tent. I opened it quickly and found three children from the neighbouring tents, their lips blue from the cold, with their mother trembling behind them saying, "We are completely soaked… the rain leaked inside and the water reached everywhere."

The same tragic scene was repeated all around us: women, children, and elderly people sitting in the street under the rain, their bedding drenched and their belongings scattered, while confusion and cries filled the air.

All 1.4 million displaced Palestinians who lack proper shelter suffered that day—people with no protection against the weather or its sudden storms.

For us, it took two full days for our belongings to dry because the sun barely appeared; everything stayed cold and damp. We didn't move to another place—we stayed where we were, trying to salvage whatever we could, because there was simply nowhere else to go.

Only a week later, an even stronger winter storm arrived with severe rainfall. Tents were flooded again; little children froze in the rain again.

This week, when Storm Byron hit, we were flooded once again. Despite all our efforts to reinforce the tents, secure them tightly, and bring in stronger tarps, nothing worked. The winds were fiercer, the rain heavier, and the water pushed its way inside from every direction. The ground no longer absorbed anything. The water began rising rapidly beneath our feet, turning the entire area into a swamp.

According to the authorities, the strong winds destroyed at least 27,000 tents. These are 27,000 families who already struggled and now have nothing, no shelter, nowhere to hide from the rain and cold.

The rain also brought down damaged homes where people had been sheltering. Every time there is a storm or strong wind, we hear the sound of falling debris and concrete pillars from badly damaged buildings near us. This time, the situation was so bad that 11 people were killed by collapsed buildings.

It is clear that after everything we have endured, we – like other displaced Palestinians – cannot survive a third winter in these harsh conditions. We survived two winters in displacement, living in tents that protected neither from cold nor rain, waiting with exhausted patience for a ceasefire that would end our suffering. The ceasefire finally came, but relief did not. We remain in the same place, with bodies drained by malnutrition and illness, under tents worn out by the sun and wind.

We are a family of seven living in a tent that is four by four metres (13 feet by 13 feet). Among us are two children aged five and 10 and our grandmother, aged 80. We, the adults, can push through the cold and hardship. But how can the elderly and children bear what we live every day?

We sleep on mattresses pressed directly against the ground, with cold seeping in from below and above, with only two blankets that can't shield us from the freezing nights. Everyone in the tent has two blankets each, barely enough to offer temporary warmth. There is no source of heating—no electricity, no heater—just tired bodies trying to share whatever warmth remains.

My grandmother cannot tolerate the cold at all. I watch her shiver through the night, her hand on her chest as if trying to hold herself together. All we can do is pile every blanket we have on top of her and watch anxiously until she is able to fall asleep. Many people in Gaza live in conditions far worse than ours.

Most families who just want a modest tent over their heads cannot afford one. The price of tents can go as high as $1,000; the rent one has to pay to pitch a tent on a piece of land can be as much as $500. Those who cannot pay live in the street in makeshift shelters.

Salah al-Din Street, for example, is crowded with them. Most are simply blankets hung and wrapped around small spaces for minimal privacy, offering no protection from rain or cold. With any strong gust of wind, they burst open. There are also children living directly in the streets, sleeping on the cold ground. Many have lost their mothers or fathers during the war. When you pass by, you see them—sometimes silent, sometimes crying, sometimes searching for something to eat.

Despite repeated promises of aid and reconstruction, the trickle of supplies that entered Gaza has made almost no difference on the ground. Earlier this month, the United Nations announced it had managed to distribute only 300 tents during November; 230,000 families received a single food parcel each.

We did not receive any food parcel—there are simply too many people in need, and the quantities are far too small for everyone to access. Even if we had received one, its contents wouldn't have lasted us longer than a week or two.

Food prices continue to be high. Nutritious items like meat and eggs are either unavailable or cost too much. Most families have not eaten a proper protein meal in months. There is no mass campaign to remove rubble or level the ground so people can pitch their tents due to an equipment shortage. No steps have been taken to provide permanent housing for families.

All of this means we now face a terrifying possibility: that life in a tent—one that can be flooded or ripped apart by the wind at any moment—may become our long-term reality. This is an unbearable thought. During the bombardment, we lived with the constant fear of death, and perhaps the intensity of the war overshadowed everything else—the cold, the rain, the tents shaking above our heads. But now, after the mass bombing has stopped, we are facing the full ugliness of Gaza's "new normal".

I fear this winter will be much worse for Gaza. With no heating, no real shelter, and the weather getting worse each day, we are likely to see many deaths among the children, the elderly and the chronically ill. Already, the first deaths from hypothermia were reported – babies Rahaf Abu Jazar and Taim al-Khawaja and nine-year-old Hadeel al-Masri. If the world is really committed to ending the genocide in Gaza, it needs to take real, urgent action and ensure that we have at least the basic conditions for survival: food, housing and medical care.

The US is already at war with Venezuela

Belén Fernández

Recently, the United States hijacked an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela – a new move in the ongoing aggression against the South American nation by the administration of US President Donald Trump.

Over recent months, the US has gone about wantonly blowing up small boats in the Caribbean Sea along with their passengers, whom Trump has telepathically divined to be drug traffickers. Exercising his passion for ridiculous overstatement, Trump proclaimed on Wednesday that the seized vessel was a "large tanker, very large, largest one ever seized, actually".

When asked at a news conference about the ship's altered destination, Trump advised reporters to "get a helicopter and follow the tanker" – although folks might reasonably be wary of taking to the skies around Venezuela given Trump's unilateral decree in November that the country's airspace was "closed in its entirety".

Of course, the airspace closure hasn't managed to interfere with continuing US deportation flights to Venezuela. Regarding the fate of the tanker's valuable contents, Trump remarked, "I assume we're going to keep the oil." To be sure, this comment doesn't do much to shore up the US claim that it's not after Venezuela's vast oil reserves at all, but is simply trying to guard the hemisphere against nefarious Venezuelan narco-terrorists endeavouring to flood the homeland with fentanyl and other deadly products.

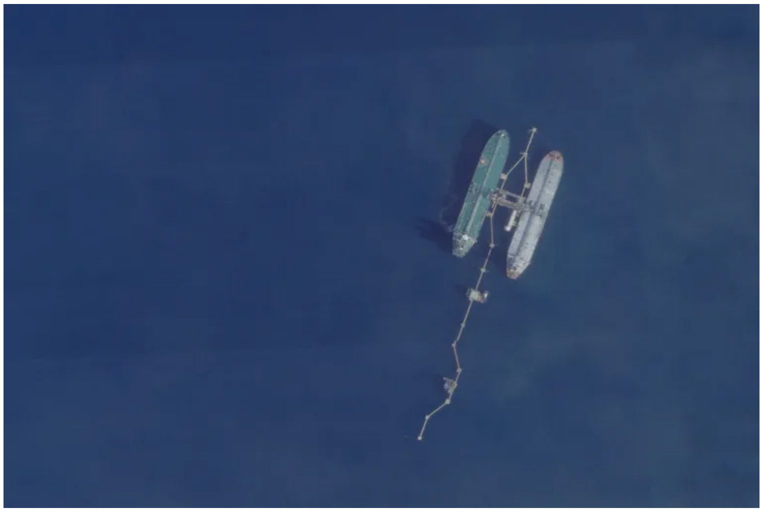
As per Trumpian fantasy, the ringleader of the narco-terror operation is none other than Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro himself. Never mind that Venezuela has approximately zero to do with drugs entering the US and doesn't even produce fentanyl.

At times like these, one can't help but recall US behaviour vis-a-vis another oil-rich nation around the turn of the century, when then-President George W Bush oversaw a campaign of mass slaughter in Iraq based on manufactured allegations of weapons of mass destruction.

But amid all the talk of a potential US war on Venezuela – which Trump has been threatening for months – the fact of the matter is that the US is already waging war on the country. US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, newly rebranded as the "Secretary of War", recently admitted as much when he chalked up US war crimes against Caribbean seafarers to the "fog of war".

In reality, however, the US war on Venezuela long predates this year's slew of extrajudicial executions and terrorisation of local fishermen. After backing a failed coup in 2002 against Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chavez, a socialist icon and thorn in the side of empire, the US imposed punishing sanctions on Venezuela in 2005.

According to the Washington, DC-based Center for Economic and Policy Research, these sanctions would go on to cause more than 40,000 deaths in the country in 2017-18 alone. Anyone doubting the intentional lethality of coercive economic measures would do well to recall the 1996 response of then-US ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright to the estimate that half a million Iraqi children had thus far perished as a result of the US sanctions regime: "We think the price is worth it."



Sanctions on Venezuela were then drastically intensified by Trump in 2019, with an eye to assisting Juan Guaido – the little-known right-wing character who had spontaneously appointed himself interim president of Venezuela – in his efforts to oust Maduro. Those efforts were unsuccessful, and Guaido ended up in Miami, but sanctions continued to wreak devastating havoc. In March 2019, Trump's former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo boasted eloquently to the press of the effectiveness of economic warfare: "The circle is tightening. The humanitarian crisis is increasing by the hour … You can see the increasing pain and suffering that the Venezuelan people are suffering from."

Indeed, while the official narrative is that sanctions are meant to target the powers that be, it is the general public that pays the price. In the years following Guaido's failed auto-election, the "suffering that the Venezuelan people are suffering from" became ever more apparent, and by 2020, former UN Special Rapporteur Alfred de Zayas estimated that 100,000 Venezuelans had died on account of sanctions.

In 2021, UN expert Alena Douhan reported that the economic blockade had rendered more than 2.5 million Venezuelans severely food insecure. This is to say nothing of outbreaks of previously controlled diseases, stunted growth among children, and shortages of water and electricity.

It can meanwhile be safely filed under the "can't make this sh*t up" category that, at the very moment he is going after alleged narco-traffickers in Venezuela, Trump chose to pardon Juan Orlando Hernandez, the right-wing former narco-president of Honduras who was convicted last year in a US federal court.

In October, Trump authorised the CIA to conduct covert operations inside Venezuela – the same CIA, mind you, that has been up to its eyeballs in the drug trade since forever. Now with the tanker hijacking, the administration has underscored its acute disregard for anything resembling civilised diplomacy. The other day, I spoke with a young Venezuelan man whom I met in the Darien Gap in 2023 as he made his way towards the US – one of millions of Venezuelans forced to leave home in search of a life that is economically sustainable.

After almost drowning in the river as he crossed from Mexico into the US, he was detained for a month and then provisionally released into the country. Two years later, he was captured by ICE agents in California, detained for several more months, and then deported to Caracas. When I asked him his thoughts on Trump's current machinations in Venezuela, he said simply: "I have no words." And as the US barrels towards another surreal war armed with blatant lies, words are indeed often hard to come by.

Common drugs, uncommon danger

While there is always a shortage of medicines, including the life-saving ones, there is another related dilemma which hardly gets noticed despite being life-threatening. The ill-advised tendency towards self-medication receives little attention in society even though it has serious health risks. The use of medicines without proper understanding or super-vision can quietly disturb the heart's rhythm and, in rare cases, trigger sudden cardiac events.

Many would be surprised to know that several widely used drugs have the potential to prolong the heart's QT interval, which represents the part of the heartbeat's electrical cycle that must reset properly for the heart to function normally. When this interval becomes excessively long, the heart can slip into dangerous arrhythmias.

In Pakistan, some of the most frequently used medicines have the potential to cause such harm. Antibiotics commonly used for sore throat, chest infections, fever and suspected typhoid can affect the heart, especially in older adults, dehydrated patients, or those already taking other contra-indicated medicines.

Similarly, antibiotics often used for urinary tract infections and abdominal discomfort can increase cardiac risk when combined with certain other drugs. Unfortunately, these antibiotics are often taken without prescription, dose guidance, or awareness of drug interactions.

Psychiatric medicines present another concern. This is a serious concern because some of these medicines are frequently used in Pakistan incorrectly as sleep aids for the elderly. When taken without medical supervision, these medicines can disturb the heart's rhythm, or cause sudden drop in blood pressure, putting vulnerable individuals at risk. Even common painkillers, which every household relies upon, deserve caution. Regular high-dose use of such drugs for joint pain or backache can raise blood pressure, strain the kidneys, and indirectly burden the heart, particularly among individuals with diabetes or hypertension. Many patients who arrive in emergency rooms with heart failure have a history of prolonged painkiller use without medical monitoring.

Over-the-counter (OTC) cold and flu medicines pose yet another hidden risk. Preparations marketed for blocked nose or quick relief can sharply increase heart rate and blood pressure. A person with undiagnosed hypertension, dehydration, or an underlying heart condition may experience palpitations, chest pain or even collapse after taking these seemingly harmless remedies. Electrolyte-disturbing medicines also require attention. Diuretics, commonly taken without prescription for swelling or 'water reduction', can dangerously lower potassium and magnesium levels. These minerals are vital for the heart's electrical stability. Many sudden collapses in older patients, especially during hot weather, are linked to preventable electrolyte disturbances caused by unmonitored use of diuretics.

While patients and their caregivers can protect themselves by being a little more prudent in this regard, healthcare professionals have a major role to play. Doctors can reduce the risk by spreading awareness among their patients regarding drug interactions, and, more critically, by avoiding writing unnecessary prescriptions themselves. Medicines are life-saving tools when used wisely, but when taken carelessly without due guidance, even common drugs can become silent threats, slowly pushing one towards a grave health crisis. Awareness, careful prescribing, and responsible use of medications can protect countless lives.

Roohi Bano Obaid
Karachi

Artificial Intelligence, real consequences

Undoubtedly, AI may provide a competitive edge in terms of both speed and cost-effectiveness in the industrial world, but there are some challenges that should not be ignored.

Take the case of education as an example. A research conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) offered revealing conclusions. The research was based on an experimental and a control group. The experimental group was given an AI-based assignment, whereas the control group was given a non-AI based assignment. The result, not surprisingly, indicated that the critical cognitive ability was low in the AI-based group compared to the non-AI-based control group.

It is important that AI ought to be used with great care to avoid counterdependence of students to keep their enslavement to the machine at bay. Besides, if AI is used for organisational efficiency, it can result in unemployment with serious social consequences. Therefore, any policy of digitalisation and over-reliance on AI algorithms has to be adopted while being utterly mindful of the consequences.

Dr Zafar Iqbal Qureshi
Lahore

Without manifestos, accountability suffers

The current electoral landscape of Pakistan shows a near-absence of the tradition of issuing party manifestos. In a democratic polity, a manifesto provides an outline of the ideology, policy and commitments, directing the course of informed choices and government accountability. This absence in Pakistan has created a void which is filled by promises and rhetoric. Personalities and emotional appeal direct electoral behaviour where policy remains missing from electoral discourse. The result is a reactive government where reforms in tax policy, education, climate and local government remain postponed, and weak parliamentary oversight, resulting from the lack of benchmarks to measure the performance of the ruling government, make matters much worse.

Shahzaib Hayat Khan
Mianwali

Reels behind the wheel

Slow-moving cars are a new nuisance on the roads of Lahore, creating an uncertain situation for the other vehicles commuting on the road. Using mobile phones while driving is supposed to be a violation, but careless drivers use social media and watch reels and videos while driving. They are totally unaware of traffic lanes and the speed of their vehicles. Traffic police need to seriously monitor this issue. There should be zero tolerance on usage of phones while driving cars as this can lead to serious accidents and loss of lives.

Dr Majid Rauf Ahmad
Lahore

Rhetoric over responsibility

With Pakistan facing a myriad of issues, including internal and external security threats, and at a time when the nation needs unity and harmony for the sake of the country's stability and future, there are politicians spewing venom against state institutions, polarising the already polarised society. This is regrettable.

Such politicians are increasingly being seen as figures whose actions seem to exacerbate problems rather than offering solutions. Instead of fostering constructive measures and serving the people, their frequent confrontational statements and unnecessary and inflammatory speeches are contributing to the rising level of tension in society. The spread of inaccurate reports and misleading information is damaging the country's overall stability.

The armed forces are one of the most important pillars of the state. In this context, speaking against them or adopting a confrontational tone sends the wrong message, and can encourage hostile narratives from outside. Pakistan's survival, political stability and democracy require patience, responsibility and sensible behaviour by all concerned.

Difference of opinion is natural and everyone has the right to disagree, but when it comes to national matters, unity, careful planning and collaboration are essential elements. A practical political strategy can provide real solutions, not threats to state institutions. We need politicians who may have the capacity and the desire to build bridges. The preferred option should be diplomacy and dialogue, not daily confrontation. This is the only approach and the way forward that will lower political tensions, protect democracy, and benefit the country.

Hayan Ahmed Khan
Islamabad

Most people aren't getting enough omega-3: What are the health impacts?

David Mills

Scientists have demonstrated the harmful effects of saturated fats on heart health, while omega-3 fatty acids like EPA show protective effects. A recent study by a Japanese research team reveals how EPA helps maintain calcium homeostasis in heart cells disrupted by saturated fats, involving key pathways and regulatory proteins that could guide future dietary recommendations and health guidelines. Over the past few decades, scientists have generated a pile of evidence suggesting that a diet rich in saturated fats is enough to cause heart diseases. Besides other problems like diabetes and atherosclerosis, saturated fats have also been linked to life-threatening arrhythmias. Interestingly, based on animal and human studies, certain omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids seem to have beneficial effects on cardiovascular health. In particular, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), which is found in fish oil, not only has vasodilator and antiplatelet effects, but can even help prevent atrial fibrillation and other arrythmias. Despite EPA being readily available as a dietary supplement, the effect of EPA on cardiomyocytes and their underlying mechanisms of action are not fully understood. In a recent study published online in the International Journal of Molecular Sciences, a research team from Japan set out to bridge this knowledge gap. Led by Associate Professor Masaki Morishima from Kindai University, they investigated the role of EPA in inducing long-term electrical changes in cultured mouse cardiomyocytes using a variety of bioanalytical techniques.

'Beer belly' linked to higher risk of heart damage

Mandy French

Abdominal obesity, often referred to as a "beer belly," is an accumulation of visceral fat that is stored around the internal organs.

Visceral fat is a type of fat stored within the abdominal cavity that can accumulate in the arteries, contributing to the development of cardiovascular disease. A new study found that abdominal obesity is not only linked to harmful changes in heart structure, but that these effects were more apparent among males.

The researchers used advanced cardiac MRIs to detect beer belly-associated heart changes that could signal early heart stress before the onset of cardiovascular disease or symptoms. The study, however, did not examine beer consumption among the subjects. The findings were recently presented at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA), held from November 29 to December 3, in Chicago, IL. The study has not yet been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

"Abdominal obesity, a high waist-to-hip ratio, is associated with more concerning cardiac remodeling patterns than high body mass index (BMI) alone," lead study author Jennifer Erley, MD, a radiologist resident at the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany, said in a press release. For the study, researchers examined MRI scans of 2,244 adults ages 46 to 78. The study found that obesity, as measured by BMI scores, was more strongly associated with enlarged heart chambers across all participants, regardless of sex.

Abdominal obesity, or "beer belly," was more associated with a thickening of the heart muscle and smaller heart chambers. These abdominal obesity-related changes were more prominent in males, particularly in the right ventricle. The right ventricle pumps blood to the lungs.

Scientists spot monster black hole roaring with winds at more than 130 million mph

Joanna Thompson

Astronomers have spotted a supermassive black hole whipping up cosmic winds at record speeds.

The black hole, located 135 million light-years from Earth in the center of the NGC 3783 spiral galaxy, caught researchers' attention after emitting a huge X-ray flare. As the burst died down, it left winds of more than 37,000 miles per second (60,000 kilometers per second) — one-fifth the speed of light — howling in its wake. "We've not watched a black hole create winds this speedily before," Liyi Gu, an astronomer at Space Research Organisation Netherlands who led the research, said in a statement. Gu and his colleagues were studying NGC 3783's active galactic nucleus (AGN), the bright, busy region surrounding a galaxy's feeding supermassive black hole. These areas are known to suddenly flare and belch jets of material and wind into space. The researchers think the intense X-ray burst and subsequent gale they observed was powered by the black hole's tangled magnetic field, which suddenly "untwisted." The team likened the process to how Earth's sun releases enormous eruptions of plasma called coronal mass ejections shortly after our star's magnetic field lines tangle and snap. However, in this case, the supermassive black hole has the mass of 30 million suns, which puts its flares and ejections "on a scale almost too big to imagine," Matteo Guainazzi, a team member and European Space Agency (ESA) astronomer, said in the statement. (For reference, the winds from a recent coronal mass ejection clocked in at a paltry 930 miles, or 1,500 km, per second.)

Giant structure discovered beneath Bermuda is unlike anything else on Earth

Stephanie Pappas

Move aside, Bermuda Triangle: The newest North Atlantic mystery lies beneath this enigmatic archipelago. Scientists have discovered a strange, 12.4-mile-thick (20 kilometers) rock layer below the oceanic crust under Bermuda. This level of thickness has never been seen in any other similar layer worldwide.

"Typically, you have the bottom of the oceanic crust and then it would be expected to be the mantle," said study lead author William Frazer, a seismologist at Carnegie Science in Washington D.C. "But in Bermuda, there is this other layer that is emplaced beneath the crust, within the tectonic plate that Bermuda sits on."

While the origin of this layer is not entirely clear, it may explain an ongoing mystery about Bermuda, Frazer told Live Science. The island sits on an oceanic swell, where the ocean crust is higher than its surroundings. But there is no evidence of any ongoing volcanic activity creating that swell — the island's last known volcanic eruption was 31 million years ago.

The discovery of the new giant "structure" suggests the last eruption may have injected mantle rock into the crust, where it froze in place, creating something like a raft that raises the ocean floor by about 1,640 feet (500 meters).


ہر دن نئی تازگی
Saba
BEAUTY
SOAP
Saba
BEAUTY SOAP
Saba
BEAUTY SOAP
Saba
PS: 13 - 2018 ®
Pakistan Standards