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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

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PAKISTAN'S DEEPENING DEBT CRISIS



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About Us

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

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Pakistan's deepening debt crisis

Farhan Khan

According to the Annual Debt Review for Fiscal Year 2025 prepared by the Debt Management Office, Pakistan's overall public debt stock increased sharply from Rs71.2 trillion in June 2024 to Rs80.6 trillion by June 2025, reflecting an increase of nearly 13 percent. This surge also pushed per capita public debt from Rs294,098 to Rs333,041 during the same period.

Meanwhile, the Debt Policy Statement 2026, prepared under the Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Limitation (FRDL) Act for submission to the National Assembly, reveals an even more alarming picture. In FY2024-25, public debt breached the statutory ceiling by a staggering Rs16.8 trillion, reaching 70.7 percent of GDP against the maximum permissible limit of 56 percent set by Parliament.

In effect, public debt exceeded the legal threshold by a substantial 14.7 percent of GDP, underscoring the government's persistent failure to observe fiscal discipline. The debt-to-GDP ratio climbed from 68 percent in June 2024 to 70 percent in June 2025, in clear violation of the 60 percent ceiling envisaged under the FRDL Act. It is pertinent to note that public debt comprises both domestic and external components. Domestic debt includes short- and long-term borrowing, national savings schemes, floating debt, and Naya Pakistan Certificates, while external debt consists mainly of loans from the IMF and friendly countries.

The government maintains that borrowing from domestic and external sources has been necessitated by slow growth in nominal GDP. Authorities also argue that the primary driver behind the expanding debt stock is the size of the fiscal deficit, shaped largely by the primary balance. Additionally, it is claimed that rising interest payments have been the principal contributor to debt accumulation in recent years.

In response, the government has recently attempted to curb the growth in debt stock by reducing interest payments. However, this approach is neither sustainable nor sufficient in the long run. A more durable solution lies in curbing other components of current expenditure, which remain the main reason for the government's heavy reliance on borrowing, both domestically and externally. The steady expansion of current expenditure has also constrained the government's ability to allocate adequate funds for the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), thereby undermining efforts to meet the development needs of a

rapidly growing population.

Official documents detailing old and new loan agreements expose the long-standing weaknesses in the government's spending framework, notably the absence of careful planning and prudent budgeting aligned with available resources. With little regard for fiscal discipline, government departments routinely overspend, and the resulting gaps are filled through fresh borrowing. This consumption-driven and debt-dependent operating model persists in the absence of a coherent long-term strategy to enhance the economy's productive capacity.

At present, nearly half of the federal budget is consumed by debt servicing, leaving limited fiscal space for development spending. To finance routine government operations,

investment required for sustainable long-term growth. Despite repeated assurances of commitment to the FRDL Act, the government has made little tangible progress toward fiscal consolidation or deficit reduction. Revenue targets are consistently missed, while no credible plans have been introduced to rein in current expenditure.

Instead, the authorities have relied on temporary measures such as extending debt maturities through increased issuance of medium- and long-term instruments. Such steps merely postpone the problem rather than resolving it. The debt trap cannot be broken as long as the government continues to live beyond its means and fails to generate sufficient revenue.

Without addressing this fundamental



additional taxes are imposed on an already burdened population in the form of sales tax, GST and withholding taxes. As a result of these extravagant fiscal practices, Pakistan's debt crisis has continued to worsen with each passing year.

Available data indicate that between FY2015 and FY2025, public debt surged by an astonishing 365 percent, rising from Rs17.3 trillion to over Rs80.5 trillion. During the same period, debt servicing costs increased at a pace far exceeding revenue growth, further tightening fiscal constraints.

A stark reality is that domestic debt servicing has been the single largest contributor to expenditure growth over the past three years, crowding out development spending and depriving the economy of the productive

imbalance, debt management will only delay an eventual fiscal reckoning rather than placing public finances on a sustainable footing. The prevailing culture of unchecked spending, budget overruns by government departments, prioritisation of consumption over productive investment, and continued expansion of an already top- and middle-heavy bureaucracy lies at the heart of the problem.

Unless this flawed model is abandoned, the government will remain trapped in a cycle of borrowing to sustain an unsustainable system. The only viable solution to Pakistan's debt dilemma lies in adopting decisive measures to reduce current expenditure, thereby freeing up resources to strengthen and expand the productive capacity of the economy and fully exploit its vast export potential.

Terrorist menace: an existential challenge

Nasim Ahmed

Pakistan has been hit by a series of dastardly terrorist attacks in recent weeks, triggering grave concerns over national security and sectarian harmony. The latest and most shocking incident was a suicide bombing at an Imambargah in the federal capital on February 6, which claimed at least 31 lives and left more than 160 people injured. The attack stands as one of the deadliest assaults in Islamabad in nearly two decades.

The bombing targeted the Khadija Tul Kubra mosque in the Tarlai Kalan area during Friday prayers. A suicide bomber detonated explosives inside the Shia place of worship, killing worshippers and injuring dozens. An affiliate of the Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the attack, which drew widespread international condemnation, including from the United Nations, Türkiye, China, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Funerals for the victims were held under heavy security the following day, while authorities arrested several suspects linked to the incident. The attack followed a troubling pattern of escalating extremist violence, including a November 2025 blast outside a courthouse in Islamabad that killed 12 people.

Only days earlier, Pakistan had witnessed one of the most coordinated militant offensives in recent memory in Balochistan. Beginning in late January and continuing into early February, militants belonging to the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) launched near-simultaneous suicide bombings and gun attacks across multiple districts, including Quetta, Gwadar, Mastung, Nushki, Pasni, and Kharan. The targets included police stations, security installations, a high-security prison, and civilian areas.

Official figures indicate that at least 48 people were killed in these attacks, including 31 civilians—among them five women and three children—as well as several security personnel. In response, Pakistani security forces launched extensive counter-operations, eliminating more than 145 militants during raids and manhunts conducted over a 48-hour period. The United Nations Security Council condemned the attacks as “heinous and cowardly” and called for accountability. Pakistani authorities have also pointed to external

actors, including alleged Indian sponsorship, for backing the BLA and have urged the UN to designate the group under global sanctions regimes.

These incidents are part of a broader resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan, with groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), BLA separatists, and ISIL affiliates exploiting regional instability, particularly along the Afghan border. In response to the growing threat, Pakistan continues to pursue a comprehensive counter-terrorism framework. Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability), launched in 2024, remains a central pillar of this strategy. The operation focuses on eliminating terrorist networks through intensified military action, intelligence-based operations, and enhanced border security aimed at dismantling militant safe havens and curbing cross-border movement.

Beyond kinetic responses, authorities



have emphasised a broader, multi-pronged approach. This includes strengthening legal frameworks such as the Anti-Terrorism Act, enhancing the capacity of the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to coordinate counter-financing and anti-money laundering efforts, and preventing radicalisation through the 2025 National Policy to Counter Violent Extremism. The policy is built around a “5-R” framework—Revisit, Reach Out, Reduce, Reinforce, and Reintegrate—designed to reform education, engage religious leaders and youth, promote counter-narratives, and address socioeconomic drivers such as poverty and political marginalisation in vulnerable regions.

Security experts caution that while military operations have produced tactical successes—evident in the high militant casualty figures in Balochistan—lasting peace will remain elusive without addressing root causes.

These include inclusive development, regional cooperation, and sustained community resilience programmes. For decades, Pakistan’s counter-terrorism strategy has relied heavily on military force. While such operations have dismantled numerous terror cells and saved countless lives, the persistence of high-casualty attacks in urban centres like Islamabad underscores a sobering reality: terrorism has not been defeated; it has merely evolved, relocated, and rebranded.

The targeting of a Shia mosque in the heart of the capital was not only an attack on innocent civilians but also an assault on the notion of Pakistan as a society capable of accommodating peaceful diversity. The danger posed by extremist violence lies in its ability to exploit long-standing grievances, mistrust, and narratives of exclusion. When communities feel marginalised—socially, politically, or economically—they become more susceptible to radical actors who offer identity and purpose through violence.

Pakistan’s leadership has repeatedly called for national unity against terrorism. However, unity demands more than rhetoric; it requires meaningful policy shifts. First, counter-terrorism must place equal emphasis on countering extremist ideology, not just conducting kinetic operations. This entails sustained investment in education, promotion of tolerance, and empowerment of local voices that reject extremism.

Second, socioeconomic disparities—particularly in Balochistan and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—must be addressed comprehensively to eliminate the conditions that enable militant recruitment. Third, intelligence and law enforcement agencies must move toward anticipatory policing, identifying and neutralising threats before they materialise.

Historically, Pakistan’s security architecture has focused outward—on borders and militant hideouts. Today’s threat landscape requires a strategic shift inward, toward communities, youth engagement, and the narratives shaping everyday life. If the nation is to honour the memory of those lost in the Islamabad bombing, as well as countless victims of less-publicised attacks, it must re-evaluate the effectiveness of its current approach. Terrorism can no longer be treated solely as a battlefield challenge; it must be recognised as a national crisis demanding collective moral, social, and political resolve.

The invisible bribe

Muhammad Ali

Another survey has dropped, and it's showing the same old weird twist we keep seeing in how Pakistanis view corruption. The new Ipsos-FPCCI Index of Transparency and Accountability (iTAP) — basically Pakistan's first homegrown attempt at measuring this stuff properly — highlights a big disconnect: most people say they haven't personally had to pay a bribe or deal with shady stuff, but almost everyone still thinks corruption is everywhere in government offices.

Here's the key stat that jumps out: 68% of people believe bribery is super common in state institutions. Yet only about 27–32%, depending on how you slice the numbers, actually say they were ever asked for one themselves. Same thing with nepotism or people getting rich illegally — hardly anyone reports running into it directly, but the vast majority are convinced it's rampant.

It's like this: even if your own trip to the office or getting a document goes smoothly, or you barely interact with these places, the default assumption is still “yeah, it's corrupt.” That gap isn't just interesting — it's a massive red flag about the trust crisis we've got going on. Public institutions have such a bad reputation that perception sticks way harder than reality for a lot of people.

These perception surveys aren't perfect detectives of actual corruption as they don't catch every hidden deal. What they really measure is frustration, anger, and that deep-seated feeling that the system is rigged or broken. In Pakistan, believing “corruption is just how things work here”

has become almost automatic — an expectation more than something you always see with your own eyes.

Look at specific institutions: things like the FBR (tax guys), district administrations, or even parts of the judiciary often top the “most corrupt” lists in people's minds, even though many respondents said they rarely or never dealt with them. Once an institution gets labeled as dirty, that stain is tough to wash off — and the damage from bad perception can hurt as much as real cases of

wrongdoing.

This lack of trust hits us hard in real life. Take taxes: loads of people would rather pay sneaky indirect taxes, like sales tax on everything you buy, that feel less personal than filing directly with the FBR, because they just don't trust the tax people. That keeps our tax net super narrow, the same middle-class folks end up carrying more of the load, and the resentment builds.

But here's a silver lining — the survey isn't all doom. It points to something we're already seeing work: technology and digitization can actually shift perceptions for the better. NADRA stands out big time — it consistently gets the highest satisfaction ratings because everything's online, streamlined, and there's less room for someone to ask for “chai-pani” under the table. Traffic police have improved in people's eyes too, thanks to e-challans cutting down on the old roadside haggling.

aiming instead for an objective look at how much the public truly trusts its government and institutions.

To capture this snapshot, researchers conducted extensive fieldwork throughout December 2025 and January 2026. The scale of the study was massive, involving interviews with more than 6,000 men and women across a diverse landscape of 82 urban and rural districts and over 195 tehsils. To ensure the findings weren't one-sided, the team also included a specialized sample of 300 respondents from within government institutions to gain an insider's perspective on the state of public integrity.

Bottom line from this iTAP survey: fixing corruption in Pakistan isn't just about catching crooks and throwing them in jail. It's about rebuilding trust from the ground up — changing how people see institutions so that when things



Tech isn't magic — it won't fix everything if there's no real oversight or punishment for the big fish. But by automating stuff, reducing face-to-face chances for bribes, and leaving a digital paper trail, it shrinks the playground where corruption happens and makes it easier to catch.

The iTAP initiative was launched in May 2025 by the FPCCI as a home-grown effort to create a lasting benchmark for transparency and accountability across Pakistan. The organizers designed the project to move beyond guesswork,

actually get better, people notice and believe it. Transparency, consistent rules, and smart use of apps and online systems can help close that perception-reality gap. Without that, even real progress might get lost in the noise of “sab chor hain” cynicism.

We've got the data now showing where the problem really sits. The question is whether we use it to push for meaningful change — or just add it to the pile of reports everyone nods at and then ignores.

Can new incentives fix Pakistan's value-addition crisis?

Husnain Shahid

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently announced a package of incentives designed to give Pakistan's exporters some breathing room. At the top exporters' awards for 2024–25 he unveiled measures that range from symbolic perks — two-year “blue passports” for leading exporters — to concrete cost cuts, including a lower export refinance rate and reductions in industrial electricity tariffs and wheeling charges. The goal is clear: make exporters more competitive and ease the immediate cost burden on industry. The challenge, however, will be turning short-term relief into long-term advantage without worsening Pakistan's fiscal and energy-sector fragilities.

The blue passport initiative is meant as recognition. Historically issued to officials and parliamentarians to smooth official travel and visa processing, the passport will now be extended to top exporters for two years. For awardees it's a morale booster and a practical aid for frequent international travel. But the move also invites questions of fairness and priority. Ordinary Pakistanis — students, professionals, families — face increasingly strict visa rules in many countries, and a broader, more inclusive approach to visa facilitation might yield wider economic dividends through increased education mobility, tourism, and business travel.

More substantial are the energy sector measures. Federal Minister for Power Awaiz Leghari explained that industrial power tariffs have been reduced by about Rs4.04 per unit through the removal of certain cross-subsidies that previously raised costs by as much as Rs8.90 per unit in some cases. Wheeling charges — the fees for transmitting power across distribution networks — have also been cut in many cases to below Rs9 per kWh. The net effect brings industrial energy costs to roughly 11–11.5 US cents per kWh, a relief welcomed by industry but still above rates in competing markets. For perspective, many regional rivals have lower industrial tariffs, which directly impacts price competitiveness for energy-intensive exports.

The reason these tariff changes matter goes deeper than a per-unit number. Pakistan maintains a uniform national tariff policy aimed at social equity, but that policy requires massive subsidies — historically running into the trillions of rupees annually — to keep prices consistent across regions and categories

of consumers. These subsidies strain public finances. Add to that the legacy of contracts with Independent Power Producers (IPPs), where capacity payments are guaranteed regardless of whether plants are producing, and the industry faces structural inefficiencies that also bite into foreign exchange reserves because some contracts allow profit repatriation in dollars. Even ostensibly privatized utilities such as K-Electric receive very large transfers under the current framework, raising questions about how to make broader privatization credible without fixing these underlying problems.

Renewable energy, while critical for climate goals and long-term cost reduction, has also contributed to higher capacity payments in the near term, as the system first bears upfront costs and contractual obligations. The government recently borrowed heavily from commercial banks to fill part of the circular



debt hole — a move that shifts the burden onto future budgets and consumers. Under Pakistan's IMF program, the country has committed to moving toward full cost recovery in the power sector. That commitment could put pressure on the continuation of any temporary relief if discount rates remain high or fiscal pressures increase, possibly forcing the government to raise surcharges or roll back concessions.

Export performance itself is an area of concern. Exports remain vital for reducing dependence on external borrowing and stabilizing the balance of payments, but Pakistan's export mix is dominated by low value-added goods, particularly textiles. These sectors benefited from preferences such as the EU's GSP+ since 2014, but recent developments — like the India-EU free trade agreement — create new headwinds. Recent monthly data show exports fluctuating roughly between \$2.2 billion and \$2.75 billion in the September–December 2025

window, while imports grew faster, widening the trade gap. By contrast, remittances have been a bright spot, exceeding export receipts in several months and providing important forex support.

Those remittances highlight two truths. First, external inflows from expatriates are now a key stabilizer of Pakistan's external position. Second, relying heavily on remittances is not a substitute for building a resilient export base. Policymakers should therefore use the current relief measures as a bridge: to protect jobs and firms today while accelerating structural changes that lift export quality and value-addition tomorrow.

What might those structural changes look like? They include rationalizing tariffs to reflect regional and usage differences, renegotiating or restructuring IPP contracts to reduce avoidable capacity payments, and redesigning subsidies to be smarter and more targeted. Privatization can be part of the solution, but only if it comes with reforms that make distribution companies financially and operationally viable. Investments in technology, skills, and higher-value manufacturing — including digital and tech-enabled sectors — are essential to move Pakistani exports up the value chain. Encouraging formal remittance channels and financial products that help exporters hedge risks could also help stabilize earnings.

Finally, coordination with the IMF and clarity on fiscal implications are crucial. Temporary relief without a credible plan for long-term cost recovery risks creating new liabilities that future budgets must shoulder. The government should spell out how short-term concessions fit into a broader reform program — one that balances fiscal discipline with support for growth.

In short, the prime minister's package offers welcome, immediate relief for exporters and industry. But short-term palliatives will only get Pakistan so far. The real test will be whether policymakers use this moment to implement deeper energy sector reforms, widen the tax base, and support higher-value export diversification. If they can pair empathy for struggling businesses with hard reforms that remove structural inefficiencies, Pakistan can convert temporary respite into lasting competitiveness — and build a more resilient economy for exporters and citizens alike.

Firm but fair: A pragmatic path for tax recovery

Shahid Hussain

Tax collection in a country like Pakistan is always a balancing act. Right now that balance is under strain. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) is facing a shortfall of about Rs345 billion for the first seven months of the fiscal year, and an IMF review team is due later this month. That gap isn't just an accounting headache — it reflects slower growth, rising prices, and mounting external obligations.

A recent court ruling, however, has opened a door for the FBR to recover a large chunk of revenue. Whether that opportunity stabilizes the economy or makes things worse depends entirely on how recovery is handled.

A quick backstory: tax performance this year has been uneven. Collections jumped 16% in January — above the six-month average of 10–11% — but even that improvement won't close the entire gap. The big hope came from a Federal Constitutional Court decision that threw out more than 2,200 pending challenges to a “super tax” on high-earning entities. The cases had kept roughly Rs217 billion in limbo. With the court decision, the FBR can move to collect the dues — and that could materially narrow the revenue shortfall without introducing new taxes.

But the way the FBR has begun to collect has raised alarm. Field offices sent immediate payment notices to many companies with hard deadlines. Some firms say tax officers used stark warnings — talk of shutdowns or asset seizures — which has rattled the business community. From the FBR's point of view, aggressive recovery makes sense: the government needs money fast. From the taxpayers' view, however, the super tax was not sitting in a spare account; it was deployed into operations — working capital, debt servicing, expansion. Demanding lump-sum repayment can break cash flows, especially when borrowing is expensive and liquidity is tight.

The tension was visible when the FBR chairman met a Senate finance panel. He struck a more moderate tone: officials are open to installment plans through the fiscal year-

end and say the government does not want to force closures. He suggested recovery should be handled case by case. Those reassurances are welcome — they recognize the problem is not whether the tax is due (it is, pending any review petitions) but how to collect without damaging businesses that keep people employed and exports flowing.

There are practical steps the FBR should take now to reduce harm and speed recovery: Offset pending refunds first. Many firms have legitimate refund claims that have been stuck for years. Allowing refunds to be netted against super tax liabilities would free cash into the market and simplify collections.

Offer structured installments tied to cash flow. Instead of demanding a one-time lump sum, let firms pay in realistic tranches.

Hitting larger corporations too hard risks shrinking the very tax base the FBR wants to protect.

This episode also highlights deeper weaknesses in Pakistan's tax system. Relying on a court decision to unlock Rs217 billion shows how slow dispute resolution can push revenues into limbo. Faster, more transparent appeals and digital tracking of cases would help prevent such backlogs. Broadening the tax base — bringing more sectors into compliance — would also reduce dependence on one-off recoveries. The IMF's involvement makes the stakes higher: it presses for fiscal discipline but also for policies that don't choke off growth. Heavy-handed recovery tactics would be counterproductive to both goals.

Handled wisely, the FBR's move to col-



This protects jobs and production while still honoring the state's fiscal needs.

Work with industry bodies. Sector-specific repayment plans and clear communication will build trust and reduce panic. Incentives for early payments and proportionate penalties for bad-faith delays can be designed into the system.

Why this matters beyond the immediate numbers: Pakistan's economy is fragile. High interest rates, rising energy costs after subsidy adjustments, and weak domestic demand already squeeze firms. SMEs — the backbone of the economy — run on narrow margins and are especially vulnerable to sudden cash demands.

lect super tax arrears could strengthen public finances and support IMF objectives. Handled poorly, it could trigger layoffs, production stoppages, and an erosion of investor confidence. The practical path lies in empathy and realism: match recovery to firms' cash realities, clear stalled refunds, and design flexible repayment terms. In short, revenue collection can be firm without being ruinous.

At the end of the day, sustainable tax revenue depends on a healthy private sector. If the government treats businesses as partners rather than just payers, it will not only close immediate gaps but also build a steadier foundation for growth and future tax compliance.

Merged but marginalised: Why development has failed in tribal districts

Raza Khan

The former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were merged into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in May 2018 through the 25th Constitutional Amendment. The merger was envisioned as a historic step aimed at mainstreaming, stabilising, and accelerating the socio-economic development of the long-neglected tribal region. However, nearly seven years on, the promise of integration and development remains largely unfulfilled.

Unfortunately, successive federal and KP government strategies to mainstream and develop ex-FATA—now officially referred to as the Merged Tribal Districts (MTDs)—have failed to achieve their stated objectives in any meaningful or sustainable manner. Even symbolic political gestures have yielded little impact. For instance, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which governs KP, selected Sohail Afridi, a young political worker from Khyber tribal district, for the position of chief minister of KP under the leadership of its founder chairman Imran Khan. Yet, this representation has not translated into visible improvements in governance, infrastructure, or socio-economic development in the MTDs. The disconnect between political symbolism and actual development outcomes remains stark.

As a consequence, the tribal belt—which began turning into a hub of local, national, and international extremist, militant, and terrorist groups around 2005—continues to host and reproduce militancy, not merely in physical terms but, more alarmingly, in ideological mindsets. Groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), described by the Pakistani state as Fitna-tul-Khawarij since 2007, emerged from this region and continue to find space to operate. Militancy and terrorism thriving in the Pakhtun tribal areas have not only devastated the MTDs but have also drained the entire KP province and inflicted grave damage on Pakistan as a whole. At the core of this crisis lies the chronic underdevelopment of the tribal districts, which has provided fertile ground for militant recruitment and radicalisation.

It must be emphasised that militancy, extremism, and terrorism in the Pakhtun tribal regions did not emerge spontaneously. Rather, they are the direct outcome of the anti-Soviet Afghan War (1980–1988) and the Pakistani state's deliberate social engineering in Pakhtun society. While violence existed in the region historically, these policies trans-

formed the tribal belt into a sustained hotbed of militancy. The fallout of the Afghan war, followed by prolonged instability and civil war in Afghanistan, has continuously threatened Pakistan's national interests, particularly its territorial integrity and sovereignty. After serving as Pakistan's frontline during the anti-Soviet jihad, ex-FATA was effectively abandoned, leaving its population at the mercy of fundamentalist elements nurtured through American funding and General Zia-ul-Haq's clientelist alliance with the United States.

Due to the prolonged absence of effective state writ, religious fundamentalist forces amassed extraordinary power in the tribal belt, evolving into what can best be described as a hydra-headed monster. During and especially after the Afghan war, the economy and development trajectory of the MTDs deteriorated severely. As repeatedly observed, economic deprivation and structural underdevelopment have been the root causes of unrest in all its manifestations across Pakhtun tribal lands. Given their strategic geographical location, Pakistan's tribal areas have always carried immense international importance, making neglect even more perilous.

At the time of the merger in 2018, the federal government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) reportedly promised to allocate Rs1,000 billion over a ten-year period—Rs100 billion annually—for the development of the MTDs. However, this commitment has remained largely rhetorical and has effectively turned into a pipe dream. Instead, the burden of financing development has been unfairly shifted onto the already cash-strapped KP province. KP has been forced to spend billions on the MTDs, severely compromising development in the rest of the already underdeveloped province and creating new fiscal and political challenges.

Despite these expenditures, tangible economic and infrastructural development in the MTDs remains minimal. Rampant corruption among administrative structures and contractors has played a decisive and independent role in undermining development efforts. Without an elaborate, well-thought-out, and context-sensitive development strategy, any future plans for the MTDs will remain superficial and ultimately futile. Worse still, militant, extremist, and terrorist groups will continue to entrench themselves further, exploiting prevailing conditions to expand their influence. Given the severity of deprivation, the MTDs require the injection of at least \$2 billion annually to meaningfully integrate them into Pakistan's mainstream economy and

shield KP—and the country at large—from their destabilising spillover effects. The economic development needs of the former FATA are, in short, colossal.

To reverse fundamentalist tendencies through economic development, any proposed strategy must be grounded in the socio-economic realities of the region. Unemployment is widespread, while poverty levels exceed 70 percent. Therefore, development planning must focus on short-term, high-impact deliverables capable of addressing unemployment and poverty on an emergency, war-footing basis. Among these challenges, unemployment is of paramount significance and demands urgent attention.

A viable development strategy must also account for the demographic reality that nearly 50 percent of the population in the MTDs is under the age of 15. This youth bulge has become particularly vulnerable to exploitation by religious fundamentalists, who offer financial incentives and monthly stipends to attract recruits. It is now an open secret that local Taliban groups fix regular remuneration for their members. Contrary to the assumption that recruits are driven solely by ideology, economic deprivation remains the principal factor inflating militant ranks.

Sustainability must form the next pillar of any development framework. Given the conservative social order and entrenched tribal structures, development initiatives face persistent risks of reversal. To counter this, the scale of intervention must be transformative. A combined vertical-horizontal development approach could prove effective. Vertically, the government should invest more than Rs250 billion annually in mega infrastructure projects. Horizontally, development funds must be equitably distributed across all tribal districts to avoid regional disparities.

Ultimately, the economic future of the former FATA hinges on rapid and large-scale industrialisation. Industrial development—if pursued sincerely and at scale—could fundamentally alter the region's trajectory. Alongside agro-based industries such as food processing, capital-intensive industries including cement, textiles, and engineering units must be established. Skepticism about feasibility is misplaced: Lakki Marwat already hosts one of Pakistan's largest cement plants, while Bannu is home to a major woollen mill producing high-quality fabrics. Both districts lie adjacent to the tribal areas, demonstrating that industrialisation in the region is not only possible but achievable with political will and sustained investment.

Looming water bankruptcy

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

The United Nations' warning that the world is entering an "era of water bankruptcy" is not just a dramatic turn of phrase; it is a stark diagnosis of a crisis that has been unfolding for decades, largely out of public view.

By deliberately borrowing the language of economics and finance, the UN report translates an abstract environmental problem into terms that policymakers, businesses, and ordinary citizens can immediately grasp. Income, savings, debt, depletion, and bankruptcy are concepts everyone understands—and that familiarity makes the message all the more unsettling. Humanity, it suggests, has been living on borrowed water for far too long, and the bill is now coming due.

For generations, water has been treated as a limitless gift of nature. Rivers would flow, rains would fall, aquifers would recharge, and glaciers would quietly release meltwater each year. This assumption of abundance shaped how societies planned their cities, grew their food, and expanded their industries. But the UN's framing exposes a dangerous illusion. Much like an economy that spends more than it earns, modern civilisation has been withdrawing water faster than natural systems can replenish it. What once appeared to be prosperity and growth is increasingly revealed as unsustainable overspending.

The idea of water "income" versus water "savings" lies at the heart of this argument. Renewable income comes from rainfall, rivers, and seasonal snowmelt—resources that, if managed carefully, can support human needs year after year. Savings, on the other hand, are the vast reserves accumulated over centuries or millennia: deep groundwater aquifers, glaciers, wetlands, fertile soils, and intact river ecosystems. These reserves act as buffers against droughts and climate variability. Yet across much of the world, societies have been dipping heavily into these savings to sustain intensive agriculture, sprawling cities, and water-hungry industries. The problem is that once these reserves are depleted or damaged, they cannot simply be "earned back" within a human lifetime.

This is why the UN report insists that the current crisis is not merely cyclical or temporary. It is structural. Droughts have always existed, but what makes today's situation unprecedented is the erosion of the natural safety nets

that once helped societies cope with dry years. Aquifers are being pumped faster than they can recharge, glaciers are retreating at alarming rates due to climate change, wetlands are drained for development, and rivers are so heavily regulated that many no longer reach the sea. In financial terms, humanity is not just facing a cash-flow problem; it is liquidating its assets.

Perhaps most alarming is the report's conclusion that many water systems have already crossed into a "post-crisis state of failure." This phrase suggests that, in some regions, the damage is no longer theoretical or reversible. Rivers that no longer flow year-round, aquifers contaminated by saltwater intrusion or industrial pollution, and ecosystems pushed beyond recovery thresholds are signs that water bankruptcy is not a distant future threat. It is already shaping the present, often in ways that disproportionately harm the poorest and most vulnerable communities.

South Asia provides one of the clearest and most troubling examples of this dynamic. The region has relied heavily on groundwater to fuel agricultural growth and urban expansion. Millions of tube wells have allowed



farmers to irrigate crops and cities to quench their thirst, creating a sense of water security even in dry seasons. But this apparent abundance masks a dangerous reality. Water tables are falling rapidly in many areas, land is subsiding as aquifers collapse, and contamination from arsenic, salinity, and industrial waste is spreading. What once seemed like a technological triumph is increasingly revealed as a slow-motion crisis.

The social consequences are already visible. As groundwater becomes deeper and more expensive to access, energy costs rise, placing additional burdens on farmers. Wealthier landowners and large agribusinesses can afford deeper wells and powerful pumps, while small farmers are pushed out, widening economic

inequality. In urban areas, unreliable water supplies hit informal settlements hardest, forcing residents to rely on unsafe sources or expensive private vendors. These pressures contribute to migration, social tension, and, in some cases, outright conflict over access to dwindling resources.

Climate change acts as a powerful accelerator of these trends. Rising temperatures increase evaporation, alter rainfall patterns, and intensify both floods and droughts. In regions dependent on glacier melt, shrinking ice reserves threaten long-term water security even if short-term flows temporarily increase. Climate stress exposes just how fragile over-extended water systems have become, turning what might once have been manageable shocks into full-blown emergencies.

Against this backdrop, the UN's call for "honest, science-based adaptation to a new reality" takes on special urgency. Such honesty requires acknowledging that there are hard limits to how much water nature can provide, no matter how advanced our technology becomes. It also demands political courage. Governments must be willing to re-

form wasteful subsidies, regulate over-extraction, protect ecosystems, and make difficult decisions about how water is allocated among agriculture, industry, cities, and the environment. These choices are rarely popular, but postponing them only increases the eventual cost.

Crucially, the report does not argue that water bankruptcy is inevitable. Rather, it warns that avoiding it requires a fundamental shift in how water is valued and governed. Water must be treated not as an infinite entitlement, but as a shared, finite asset whose long-term health underpins economic stability, food security, public health, and social peace. Efficiency, conservation, and ecosystem restoration are not luxuries; they are investments in resilience.

In the end, the language of bankruptcy serves as both a warning and an opportunity. Just as financial crises can force overdue reforms, the growing water crisis can push societies to rethink their relationship with the natural systems that sustain them. The cost of denial is already evident on every continent, measured in drying rivers, sinking lands, and struggling communities. The question now is whether humanity will continue to spend recklessly—or finally learn to live within its hydrological means before the accounts are irreversibly drained.

Israel's war on Gaza's healthcare continues in full force under 'ceasefire'

Mads Gilbert

On November 5, 2023, just a couple of months after the beginning of this latest assault on Palestine, my dear friend and colleague, Dr Maisara Azmi Al Rayyes, aged 28, was brutally murdered along with most of his close family in an Israeli military missile strike on his family home in Gaza City.

A brilliant and gifted young doctor specialising in women's and children's health, Dr Maisara had returned to serve his besieged and occupied homeland after completing his master's degree at King's College London as a Chevening Scholar in 2019. Until the day he was killed, he repeatedly risked his life to provide desperately needed healthcare to his people under relentless Israeli attacks.

Dr Maisara was just one of more than 1,700 Palestinian healthcare professionals killed in Gaza since October 7, 2023.

As I wrote this, I received news from Gaza that paramedic Hussein Hassan Al-Samiri, aged 48, from the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, had been killed in an Israeli air strike targeting clearly identified ambulance crews in the al-Mawasi area, west of Khan Younis. The strike hit the rescue team as they attempted to reach people wounded in an attack on tents sheltering displaced families – an attack that killed 21 people, including five children.

Al-Samiri was the fourth healthcare worker killed in Gaza since a so-called "ceasefire" was declared in October 2025 and the second in less than 24 hours. He was killed in a double-tap attack: an initial strike followed by a second, deliberate attack targeting medical responders and rescue teams as they rushed to treat the wounded. This war crime had been in the Israeli playbook for many decades. I personally witnessed double-tap attacks on ambulances and rescue teams in Beirut during the brutal and bloody Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and later in Gaza during innumerable Israeli attacks.

In the past two years, many Palestinian health workers were also executed by Israeli forces merely for doing their jobs. Last March, for example, Israeli soldiers executed 15 Palestinian paramedics and civil defence rescuers one by one in the al-Hashaashin area as they rushed to help the wounded at the site of a missile attack, before burying their bodies in a shallow mass grave in an apparent attempt to conceal the crime.

The continuation of carnage in Gaza reflects profound racist structural violence sustained by Western indifference. This indifference grants the settler-colony's genocidal government impunity, and poses a deadly threat not only to Palestinian lives, healthcare and human rights,

but also to the credibility of what is described as the rules-based international order, to all of us.

The scale of destruction facing Gaza's population is staggering. According to Gaza's Ministry of Health, at least 71,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7, with tens of thousands more still trapped beneath the rubble. Civilian death rates exceed 80 percent, with children, women and elderly people forming the overwhelming majority of victims. Life expectancy in Gaza has collapsed from approximately 74 years to around 35 years as a result of military violence, starvation, displacement, disease and the systematic destruction of medical infrastructure.

Today, Palestinian healthcare workers continue to operate under unimaginable conditions. Hospitals and clinics have been bombed, invaded or burned, yet their services continue, often at minimal capacity. The resilience and bravery of Gaza's medical professionals is extraordinary, but cannot compensate for the



systematic dismantling of the healthcare system.

The so-called "ceasefire" that went into effect on October 10, 2025 and presented internationally as a step towards ending hostilities, did nothing to lift Palestinians out of this misery. Their suffering continues under the cloak of this pretend "peace". Since the "ceasefire", Israeli military attacks have killed at least 529 Palestinians and wounded more than 1,400 others. Gaza authorities report more than 1,450 violations of the ceasefire between October 2025 and January 2026 through Israeli air strikes, artillery fire and direct shootings.

One of the promises attached to this ceasefire charade was safe evacuation routes for the sick and wounded. On January 26, the World Health Organization was able to facilitate the evacuation of just 24 children from Gaza to Jordan, accompanied by 36 caregivers. On February 2, only five critically ill patients were permitted to leave. Meanwhile, nearly 20,000 patients remain trapped inside Gaza, including 4,500 children in urgent need of treatment unavailable within the territory. More than 1,200 patients have died while waiting for permission to leave Gaza for life-saving medical care.

The man-made catastrophe facing Gaza's healthcare system is not the result of any failure by Gaza's medical professionals. It is the outcome of 18 years of siege, compounded by more than two years of sustained bombardment, and the detention, torture and targeted killing of medical personnel. The World Health Organization has recorded more than 1,800 attacks on healthcare facilities and staff across the occupied Palestinian territories since October 2023, killing more than 1,000 people and injuring nearly 2,000 others.

These attacks are part of a longer historical pattern. Over the past two decades, at least 3,254 Israeli attacks on healthcare have been documented by WHO across the occupied Palestinian territories, killing or injuring more than 4,200 patients and medical staff. Each cycle of Israeli military assault further erodes Gaza's already fragile medical system, deepening the exhaustion of a healthcare infrastructure already crippled by chronic shortages of medicines, equipment, maintenance, fuel, repair capacity and international protection.

The humanitarian consequences are visible everywhere. Gaza is now enduring its third consecutive winter under conditions of mass displacement. More than 80 percent of buildings have been damaged or destroyed. Families are living in overcrowded shelters, exposed to storms and freezing temperatures. Children have already died from hypothermia. Disease outbreaks are spreading rapidly, with more than 88,600 acute respiratory infections and approximately 11,000 cases of acute watery diarrhoea reported in recent weeks, about 80 percent affecting children, according to the World Health Organization.

Humanitarian assistance itself is under direct attack. Israel has refused to renew operating licences, banning at least 37 internationally recognised humanitarian organisations from working in Gaza, including Doctors Without Borders and the Norwegian Refugee Council. At the same time, Israel's parliament has passed legislation allowing the cutting of electricity and water supplies to United Nations agencies providing life-saving aid, healthcare and education to more than 2.5 million Palestinian refugees. The consequences are obvious and deliberate: humanitarian collapse, collective punishment and ethnic cleansing as policy.

What is unfolding in Gaza is not only a war on a population but a direct assault on the principles of international law, including the obligation to protect civilians and medical services during armed conflict. With consistent backing from the United States, Israel is replacing legal norms with raw power.

Iran-US talks in Muscat bought time, not a deal

Muhanad Seloom

The first round of Iran-US talks in Muscat produced no breakthrough. The next few weeks will determine whether they laid foundations or merely bought time before escalation.

When Iranian and American negotiators concluded several hours of talks in Muscat on February 6, publicly, neither side signalled any shift from its opening position. Iran insisted the discussions focus exclusively on the nuclear file. The United States arrived seeking a comprehensive framework that would also cover ballistic missiles, regional armed groups, and more broadly, issues Washington has raised publicly, including human rights concerns. Neither prevailed. Both agreed to meet again.

On the surface, this looks like a non-event. It was not. The Muscat round was the first high-level diplomatic engagement between the two countries since the joint US-Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, an escalation that Iran later said killed more than 1,000 people and involved strikes on three nuclear sites. That the two sides returned to the same palace near Muscat's airport where previous rounds were held in 2025, and agreed to return again is significant.

But continuation is not progress. The distance between what happened in Muscat and what a deal requires remains vast. The most striking feature of the Muscat round was not what was said, but who sat in the room. The American delegation was led by Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law. It also included, for the first time, Admiral Brad Cooper, the commander of US Central Command, in full dress uniform.

His presence at the negotiating table was not incidental. It was a signal. The USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group was operating in the Arabian Sea as the talks unfolded, and days earlier, US forces had shot down an Iranian drone that approached the carrier.

An Iranian diplomatic source told the Reuters news agency that Cooper's presence "endangered" the talks. Another, quoted by Al-Araby TV, warned that "negotiations taking place under threat" could impose strategic costs rather than advance them. For Tehran, the message was unmistakable: This was di-

plomacy conducted in the shadow of force, not as an alternative to it.

Washington, for its part, sees this as leverage. President Trump, speaking on board Air Force One after the talks, described them as "very good" and said Iran wants a deal "very badly", adding: "They know the consequences if they don't. They don't make a deal; the consequences are very steep."

This is diplomacy framed as an ultimatum. It may create urgency. It is unlikely to create trust, and trust is what this process most desperately needs.

The US withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, despite international verification that Iran was meeting its obligations. That decision shattered Iranian confidence in the durability of US commitments. Tehran's subsequent incremental breaches of the agreement, steadily increasing enrichment levels from 2019

most of last year's rounds of negotiations. Iran had previously insisted on communicating with the US only through Omani intermediaries. Crossing that barrier, even partially, suggests both sides recognise the limits of indirect talks once bargaining becomes technical.

Several tests will show whether urgency produces substance or merely speed. First, the scope question. The fundamental dispute over what the talks are about remains unresolved. Iran won the first procedural battle: The venue moved from Turkiye to Oman, regional observers were excluded, and Araghchi claims only nuclear issues were discussed. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said before the talks that the agenda needed to include "all those issues". If the second round begins with the same fight over scope, it will signal that even the basics remain unsettled.

Second, Iran's enrichment posture. Before the June 2025 war, Iran had been enriching uranium to 60 percent purity, a short technical step from weapons-grade. Tehran has said enrichment stopped following the strikes. But Iran has also conditioned International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of the bombed sites on new inspection arrangements, raising concerns among non-proliferation experts. Conversely, reports of enrichment resumption or acceleration would likely end the diplomatic track.

Third, the military environment. The US naval build-up in the Arabian Sea is not decorative. The drone

shootdown near the Abraham Lincoln and Iran's attempted interception of a US-flagged vessel in the Strait of Hormuz in the days before the talks show how quickly signalling can slide into miscalculation. Whether the carrier group is reinforced, maintained or gradually drawn down in the coming weeks will reveal more about Washington's assessment of diplomacy than any press statement.

Fourth, the sanctions rhythm. The same-day announcement of shadow fleet sanctions establishes a pattern. If Washington continues to layer new economic penalties between rounds of talks, Tehran will treat it as evidence that diplomacy is performance rather than process.



onwards, weakened its credibility, in turn.

This mutual distrust is not a negotiating obstacle that can be resolved with creative diplomacy alone. It is the defining condition under which any agreement must be built. The US has the capacity to impose enormous economic and military costs on Iran. But power does not automatically produce compliance. For commitments to hold, Iran must believe concessions will bring relief rather than new demands. That belief has been badly damaged.

Perhaps the most important development was the least visible. According to Axios, Witkoff and Kushner met directly with Araghchi during the talks, breaking from the strictly indirect format that Iran had demanded for

Trump's America First doctrine is remaking global diplomacy

Adolfo Franco

Unlike his 46 predecessors, Donald Trump's political career began with a direct bid for the presidency rather than through a progression of elected or appointed offices. His political trajectory and election as President of the United States were unprecedented. Without a track record in politics, his first term was, by definition, a foray into the ways of Washington and the conduct of international affairs. The successes of his first term enabled him to master the intricacies of American governance and prepared him for his second, which places greater emphasis on foreign policy.

One year after his second election, President Trump's foreign policy doctrine has reshaped the global order and redirected America's role in the world at lightning speed, from defence alliances to resource security strategy. Critics dismiss the Trump Doctrine as nothing more than a chaotic combination of isolationism, dismantlement of multilateralism, and imperialism. Yet the reality is quite the opposite. President Trump's vision is methodical and strategically results-driven. Although unorthodox, Trump's bold and sometimes deliberately provocative pronouncements unnerve adversaries, often leading to concessions and desired outcomes. Whether friend or foe, America-first interests define his agenda and tactics. He aptly practises the "art of the deal" to achieve his goals. Nowhere is this strategy clearer than in Greenland. Trump threatened an invasion, a maximalist bargaining position, if Denmark refused to cede the island, which he deems vital to US security. The result: an agreement in which Denmark and the US will greatly increase their joint military footprint and open investment almost exclusively to the United States while excluding Chinese and Russian encroachment. Mission accomplished: enhanced US strategic access while reinforcing Western security architecture. Trump believes that by placing American interests first, the free world will also benefit, prosper and be more secure. Trump argues that prioritising American strength ultimately stabilises and secures the broader democratic alliance.

To accomplish his objectives, Trump has discarded what he sees as the role of the United Nations and argues that the 80-year-old organisation is at best ineffective and at worst a forum for anti-Americanism and left-wing activism, frequently paralysed by veto politics and incapable of enforcing meaningful

accountability. Instead, his approach is bilateral or regional, reflecting a doctrine that prioritises direct power relationships over multilateral consensus. Regional alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have been redefined by Trump's insistence on collective engagement and greater contributions by member states, rebalancing alliance obligations to strengthen deterrence while reducing US overextension.

Wealthy allies in Europe and Asia will now shoulder more of the financial burden for their own defence. At its core, the Trump Doctrine rests on two strategic pillars designed to secure peace through strength and prosperity through leverage. First, enhanced American military strength through a proposed doubling



of the defence budget to 6 percent of the United States' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), aimed at restoring overwhelming military deterrence in an era of great power competition. Second, the promotion of investment and equitable free trade. Trade and tariffs are instruments used by Trump not only to achieve equitable trade agreements but also as strategic tools designed to shape global behaviour and advance foreign policy objectives, ranging from curtailing Russian oil purchases in support of Ukraine to combating the global illicit drug trade, demonstrating Trump's belief that economic leverage can be as decisive as military strength in shaping global outcomes.

In no region of the world has Trump invested more energy and political capital than the Middle East, which has become a central arena for his foreign policy approach. The Trump Doctrine has reaffirmed and strengthened the American-Israeli relationship while expanding the United States' historic ties to Arab allies through the Abraham Accords that Trump championed in his first term, position-

ing them as a framework for broader regional cooperation. President Biden labelled Saudi Arabia a "pariah state"; Trump, in turn, considers the Kingdom a pivotal ally and a cornerstone of regional stability. Trump's sway with Arab allies, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, was instrumental in achieving a ceasefire in Gaza, using regional alliances to advance negotiations. Trump's vision for the Middle East is largely based on a philosophy that prosperity and opportunity, particularly for the Palestinians, is the cornerstone to achieve peace. Hence, his references to the development of Gaza and investments to make it prosperous. Trump's 20-point, three-phase Gaza peace plan and Peace Council seek to balance Palestinian self-rule with Israeli security requirements.

By marshaling the resources and commitments of Turkey and key Arab allies in the region, Trump is prepared to take calculated gambles to resolve the long-festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, applying similar regional coalition-building efforts, just as he has done with the warring parties in Syria and with his support of the Shara-led government. Where Trump draws a red line is with respect to Iran. The Trump Administration subscribes to the view that most of the instability in the region is attributable to the Iranian regime's meddling and support of terrorism and Iranian proxies in Yemen, Gaza, and Lebanon. Beyond being a state sponsor of terrorism, Iran's nuclear ambitions also pose a global threat and, if successful, would serve to impose Iran's hegemony over the entire region.

Whether by military force or through a verifiable negotiated agreement, Trump is determined to conclusively end the Iranian threat, seeking to contain or dismantle Iran's strategic capabilities for the long term. Trump is the first American President to strike Iran and is prepared to do so again. With Iran's containment or with regime change through internal revolution supported by the United States, Trump would have much more leeway to press for a Palestinian state and the necessary security arrangements for both Israel and the Palestinians. In Trump's vision, the guarantors of such a peace would be the United States and a cadre of Arab leaders representing an expanded Abraham Accords roster that would include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Syria, and Lebanon, alongside other Arab states committed to regional security cooperation.

The rise of hydro-terrorism

Water has really grown to be a powerful coercive tool in South Asia. The suspension of the working structure of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) and the rapid, unchecked building of hydropower and storage infrastructure on the Indus River System by India is a disturbing trend marked by non-cooperative water governance. This changing position may be aptly termed hydro-terrorism — manipulation of water to create pressure on downstream states and their peoples.

The rivers that have been referenced as belonging to India are divided between the signatories of the IWT that was signed in 1960 and is commonly known as one of the most enduring water-sharing agreements in the world. These rivers contribute almost 80 per cent of the surface water in Pakistan, making it the critical key to its irrigation system, food production and energy generation. Any interruption has a direct impact on livelihoods, food security and economic stability.

In recent years, India has built dozens of hydropower projects along the Indus Basin, specifically in occupied Jammu and Kashmir. It is estimated that there are about 40 small and medium dams and run-of-the-river projects that are either operational, or under construction and/or are being planned. Although India claims that the projects are in line with the treaty, the cumulative storage capacity, gated spillways and peaking power designs enable upstream control of timing and volume of flows. Any interim withholding can lead to disproportional downstream damages even when it is temporary and exists within sowing seasons. As things stand, Pakistan is already regarded as a water-stressed nation and its per capita water availability today has been reduced to less than 900 cubic metres, which is nothing for a nation that had 5,000 cubic metres per person in 1951. This is way below the scarcity threshold. Pakistan has more than 90pc of its available fresh-water in agriculture, and any fluctuation in the rivers means that crops are directly impacted.

What is even more threatening is the fact that mechanisms that are required under the treaty, like data-sharing, prior project notification and dispute resolution forums, remain suspended. The mechanisms were the pillars of the treaty which were aimed at avoiding mistrust and unilateralism. Their inability poses uncertainty, reduces confidence and increases the chances of making a miscalculation. Securitisation of water, which used to be controlled by law and technical discourse, is taking place at an alarming pace.

Terrorism is not just violence, but the establishment of an order of fear and vulnerability. When millions of farmers wait to receive canal water, when reservoirs work in unpredictability, when food security is a hostage to the decisions that are made upstream, water

ceases to be a common resource; it becomes a weapon. Pakistan should internationalise this problem immediately. Without water justice, sustainable peace in South Asia is not possible. Treaties should be respected, rivers should be allowed to run their course, and, more critically, water should not be permitted to be used for coercion.

Naimat Ullah Khan
Lahore

The credibility gap of rights watchdogs

International rights bodies often betray their evaluation bias in global terms. For instance, Amnesty International recently voiced concerns regarding a constitutional amendment in Pakistan. While the watchdog was seemingly unhappy over domestic developments in Pakistan, it continued to remain conspicuously silent on a lot of real-world transgressions by some of the powerful states. This surely raised some serious and unavoidable questions about the credibility, consistency and impartiality of international human rights advocacy platforms.

In this context, it is impossible to overlook repeated public assertions and policy postures adopted by United States President Donald Trump, who, on record, dismissed the relevance of international law and multilateral constraints, openly asserting the prerogative of unilateral military action wherever it was deemed expedient by Washington.

Such rhetoric, emanating from the highest executive office of a global super-power, constitutes not merely political bravado, but a direct affront to the post-1945 international legal order premised upon sovereignty, non-intervention and collective security.

Equally alarming are the coercive policies and covert operations historically justified under the pretexts of counter-narcotics and human-trafficking enforcement, particularly in Venezuela, a state that also happens to possess the world's largest proven oil reserves. The pattern is familiar: criminalisation of political adversaries, economic strangulation through sanctions, and the weaponisation of legal narratives to legitimise regime-change ambitions. The dissonance between stated humanitarian objectives and underlying geostrategic and economic interests is neither subtle nor accidental.

More recently, escalating unrest in Iran has been accompanied by overt warnings from Washington, cautioning the Iranian state against internal law-enforcement measures under threat of 'severe consequences'. Such pronouncements amount to external interference in domestic jurisdiction and further erode the fragile norm of sovereign equality among states.

The fundamental question, therefore, is: why do international watchdogs repeat-

edly appear disproportionately vigilant when addressing all weaker or post-colonial states, while exercising conspicuous restraint when confronted with systemic violations, belligerent rhetoric, and unilateralism by dominant powers?

When laws and regulations are applied selectively, they cease to be laws and regulations, and become instruments of power. If international human rights institutions aspire to retain moral authority and normative legitimacy, they must demonstrate principled consistency, not expedient selectivity. Otherwise, the global order risks regressing to a Hobbesian reality where legality is subordinated to capability, and where might is right.

Zain Ul Abidin
Kohat

Hostage to the elite

For decades, successive federal governments have failed to meet revenue targets. It is the failure of the paid bureaucracy that has facilitated tax evasion by retailers, wholesalers, real estate investors and large-scale manufacturers, among others. The resultant burden is passed on to the people.

A state that cannot enforce financial and administrative discipline within its paid or elected public office-holders is bound to suffer from within. We must remember the admission by a former federal finance minister that he was prevailed upon by a powerful politician from Punjab to go lenient on retailers, which basically meant facilitating tax evasion. The conflict of interest prevailing behind the powerful real estate mafia has held the country hostage. As for the annual foreign remittances valued at over \$40 billion, this cannot be claimed by the federal government as an achievement. It represents the commitment of overseas Pakistanis to their families living here, and their love and devotion to them. In effect, there is no semblance of austerity visible at all in the working of either federal or provincial governments.

Malik Tariq Ali
Lahore

The elite squeeze

It becomes extremely difficult to live in a country where the ruling elite class is busy elevating its comforts at the cost of squeezing the remaining ounces of peace from the lives of the masses. The elite raise their own salaries and put the entire burden on the already-taxed. They buy luxury vehicles and impose levies on fuel. They decorate their allotted homes and tax the daily food items. These cannot be called strategies for stabilising the national economy. I often wonder when this menace will end and who, if anyone will do that.

Babar Hussain Mastoi
Larkana

A bonobo's imaginary tea party suggests apes can play pretend

RJ Mackenzie

Humans may not be the only primates with the power to imagine. During a make-believe tea party, a bonobo named Kanzi kept track of invisible juice and imaginary grapes, researchers report in *Science*.



The findings add to a growing body of work suggesting that ape minds can imagine scenarios beyond the “here-and-now,” a skill once thought to be unique to humans. Human children begin playing pretend as early as 12 months old and master the ability to build imaginary worlds by age 3. Many high-level thinking tasks are possible only because we can imagine things that aren't really there.

The study centered on Kanzi, a remarkable bonobo who could communicate using word-linked symbols called lexigrams. Amalia Bastos, a comparative psychologist at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, first met him in 2023. “We were starstruck by Kanzi,” she says.

During their first meeting, the bonobo used his lexigram-studded board to ask Bastos and a colleague to chase each other. Bastos noticed that even though they only pretended to play, Kanzi still enjoyed watching them. This kick-started a series of make-believe tests that Bastos and Christopher Krupenye, a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University, designed for Kanzi. In the first of these tests, Kanzi sat at a table with two glasses. An experimenter pretended to pour a glass of “juice” — Kanzi's tippable of choice — into both cups from a see-through empty jug. The experimenter then poured the nonexistent contents of one cup back into the jug, before asking Kanzi which cup still held the “juice.” Kanzi guessed correctly 68 percent of the time, significantly above chance, the researchers report.

How to know if a scary health headline is legit

Debbie Koenig

If you heard that Girl Scout cookies are toxic, that mRNA vaccines can harm you, or that immigrants are spreading tuberculosis in the US, maybe you should put down your phone.



You've been exposed to a dangerous and contagious epidemic: health misinformation. But don't worry, there are ways to protect yourself. Many of us have a built-in trust of the media. As Mat Stevens puts it, “If something is published, surely people have verified it — why would they lie?” Stevens is with Health Literacy Media, an organization that helps health care professionals communicate in plain language. A couple of decades ago that was surely true. But the huge growth in new media — fast, sensational, and unreliable — has changed the landscape. It's harmless for cooking and golf tips, but not for your health. These days health advice is everywhere you look, and a discovery often spreads moments after it's announced. As a careful study rolls from press release to headline to Instagram post to podcast, its findings can be misinterpreted or misrepresented. If you sense that something is off, go with your skeptical gut. And don't be surprised if you can't tell where a sketchy claim originated — that's a telltale sign of misinformation. “At no point in history did we have to evaluate hundreds of stories every day,” Stevens said. “Now we're scrolling through so much information, it's impossible to verify everything you see.” The scientific method is the step-by-step way to investigate a theory, a slow process with lots of questioning and evaluation by peers. It can take decades for a theory to become accepted — and there's always a chance that later research will change our understanding.

How Greenland sharks defy aging

Meghan Rosen

Greenland sharks are spilling new secrets about antiaging.



In the deep, dark waters of the Arctic and North Atlantic, these ghostly giants — which can live for centuries — have hit upon a few tricks for surviving long-term. Some of their organs may be resistant to the ravages of age, while others seem resilient to tissue damage that accrues over time, recent studies suggest.

The findings offer some glimmers into how these sharks manage to live longer than all other vertebrates on the planet. It's work that could one day lead to therapies for treating aging organs in people, says Lily Fogg, a biologist at the University of Basel in Switzerland. That's the “ultimate dream goal,” she says.

Scientists estimate that Greenland sharks (*Somniosus microcephalus*) may survive for upward of four hundred years. “They're these huge, ancient grandpa sharks,” Fogg says. But it's unclear how exactly their bodies keep on cruising decade after decade. Fogg's team studied the animals' eyeballs. No one knew if the sharks had much vision, let alone if that vision degraded over time. The common thinking was that the sharks were either severely visually impaired or completely blind, Fogg says. She and her colleagues examined eye tissue from 10 Greenland sharks, some up to about 150 years old. The animals had all the cellular and molecular tools in place for seeing in the deep sea's dim light, the team reported in *Nature Communications*. The tissue also looked like it had avoided the typical wear and tear of aging. That may be due to dialed-up activity of DNA repair machinery in the eyes, Fogg says.

New science reveals how to quit vaping — and stick with it

Lisa O'Mary

If you're one of the hundreds of thousands of young people trying to quit vaping, here's some good news: New research reveals the strategies that work — and can help you quit for good.



Using three tools instead of one can boost your odds of success by as much as tenfold, according to a compelling new study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. It marks the first clinical trial to examine how well medication works at helping youths quit nicotine vaping. The medicine worked so well, it surprised even the researchers, who went as far as testing the saliva of people in the study to ensure they were nicotine-free.

The drug in the study is called varenicline, commonly known by the brand name Chantix and already approved to help people quit tobacco smoking. The usual treatment that's used to stop youths from vaping is counseling. But adding medication and a supportive text messaging app helped more than half of people ages 16 to 25 quit, the study found.

“This trial makes it clear that people who try medication with behavioral support will have over three-fold higher odds of successfully quitting” — compared to those who use counseling and the app alone, said study author Eden Evins, MD, MPH, founding director of the Mass General Hospital Center for Addiction Medicine and a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. When compared to using the app alone, the combination of medication, counseling, and app support boosted success by nearly tenfold. Truth Initiative was the app used in the study, Evins said.

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