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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

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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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Petrol price shock and after

Farhan Khan

Reflecting the first direct impact of the escalating conflict in the Middle East, the government has increased petrol and diesel prices by Rs55 (\$0.20) per litre each. Global oil markets have been in turmoil since the United States and Israel began attacking Iran last week, raising fears of disruptions to key energy shipping routes and pushing petroleum prices sharply upward in international markets.

The price adjustment was announced at a joint press conference by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, and Petroleum Minister Ali Pervaiz Malik. The ministers said the government was closely monitoring international energy markets and domestic supply conditions amid the rapidly evolving Middle East crisis. However, Malik assured that once the situation stabilises, “we will revise the prices downward with the same speed and take steps to improve people’s income and purchasing power.”

Malik said Pakistan had entered the crisis with “comfortable energy reserves” due to earlier planning and supply management. Nevertheless, he explained that the sharp rise in global oil prices had forced the government to adjust domestic fuel rates to maintain supply continuity and avoid shortages. According to him, international petrol prices had climbed from roughly \$78 per barrel on March 1 to around \$106.8 per barrel, while diesel prices had risen to about \$150 per barrel. Malik added that the government had attempted to minimise the burden on consumers, noting that diesel plays a critical role in agriculture, transportation and public mobility across the country. He also warned that authorities would take strict action against anyone attempting to hoard fuel or manipulate supply for profiteering.

Even so, the government’s decision to increase petrol and diesel prices by Rs55 per litre represents the sharpest single petroleum price adjustment in recent years, accompanied by even steeper increases in kerosene and light diesel oil. The move has taken much of the country by surprise. Despite official assurances that efforts were made to minimise the impact on the public, the burden will fall heavily on ordinary citizens already struggling with rising living costs and stagnant incomes. The steep increase in kerosene prices is particularly troubling, as

it serves as a grim reminder that the poorest households disproportionately bear the heaviest burden of energy price shocks. Beyond household budgets, the consequences of this oil shock are likely to ripple across the broader economy.

Higher fuel prices inevitably increase transportation costs, which then cascade through the economy, affecting the prices of food, imports and exports, and industrial inputs. Pakistan Railways has already raised fares for economy and AC classes by 5% and 10%, respectively, reflecting the immediate impact of higher fuel costs. Economists have warned that the price hike will trigger a wider ripple effect, pushing up the cost of daily necessities such as fruits and vegetables due to higher freight and logistics charges.

This increase comes at a time when inflation has already begun creeping upward



again. Even before the outbreak of the conflict, inflation had reached around 7%. The latest fuel price adjustment is therefore likely to accelerate that trend, placing additional pressure on low- and middle-income households whose budgets are already stretched thin by the rising cost of living.

The Rs55 jump has also triggered a wave of public criticism. On social media and in public discourse, many people have described the increase as a “petrol bomb,” questioning why austerity measures so often fall on ordinary citizens while the elite remain largely insulated. Critics have particularly highlighted the generous fuel allowances provided to government officials and senior bureaucrats. These allowances vary according to official grade and position. For instance, the Punjab government recently revised its Motor Transport Policy, under which the chief secretary and the inspector general of police are entitled to three vehicles each: one official vehicle of up to 2800cc, one touring vehicle of up to 4700cc, and one personal-use vehicle of up to 1800cc. The official and personal-use vehicles are entitled to 500 litres and 300 litres of

petrol per month respectively, while the touring vehicle’s fuel consumption is covered on the basis of actual usage. Such generous entitlements, particularly at a time of economic hardship and fuel scarcity, appear increasingly difficult for the public to justify.

With global oil markets likely to experience continued volatility amid an expanding regional conflict, further price shocks cannot be ruled out in the coming weeks. Within just one week, crude prices have surged sharply, with Brent crude climbing by roughly a third to above \$92 per barrel. Market expectations suggest that prices could even approach \$150 per barrel if the conflict intensifies or drags on for an extended period.

The current crisis has once again exposed how vulnerable Pakistan’s economy is to geopolitical shocks. It also highlights deeper structural weaknesses in the country’s economic management and energy planning. For a country already struggling with a fragile external account, even modest increases in freight charges, insurance costs and the “war risk premiums” imposed by shipping companies can translate into significant financial pressure, rapidly draining the country’s already limited foreign exchange reserves. The combination of higher insurance costs, limited shipping availability and increased competition for cargoes in Asian markets could make it more difficult for Pakistan to secure energy supplies in the weeks ahead.

Pakistan’s heavy reliance on imported energy remains one of its most debilitating structural vulnerabilities. Nearly all of its petroleum requirements are met through imports, much of which passes through one of the world’s most sensitive maritime routes. Any disruption to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz — a corridor that carries roughly one-fifth of global oil supplies — has immediate consequences not only for fuel availability but also for prices in international energy markets.

In such circumstances, the government must urgently revive demand-management strategies similar to those adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Measures such as encouraging work-from-home arrangements, expanding distance learning options and promoting car-pooling could help reduce fuel consumption and conserve precious foreign exchange. In a rapidly evolving and uncertain global environment, such steps are no longer optional but essential for economic resilience.

The changing dynamics of US-Iran war

Nasim Ahmed

The Middle East war is now about two weeks but there are no signs that it is going the way the US had envisioned. The Iranians are fighting back bravely with a grit and determination that has taken the world by surprise.

The Israel-US coalition claims to have decimated Iran's nuclear facilities and missile production and launch capabilities as well as its command and control systems. No doubt, the Israel-US coalition controls the skies over most of the country, with the latter's air/missile defences almost completely knocked out. But, despite these losses, Iran continues to launch both drones and missiles at targets in Israel as well as at US military facilities across the Gulf. It seems carpet bombing by US and Israeli war planes has not much affected the functioning of Iran's 12 autonomous military-aerospace commands.

By all accounts, Iran continues to maintain the operational tempo of the war. A proof of this is that a few days ago Iran successfully executed a drone attack on Israel's Haifa refinery complex, which resulted in large fires and forced the suspension of operations at one of the country's most important energy facilities. According to Iranian officials, the strike was in retaliation for coalition attacks on oil depots near Tehran.

The dynamics of war seems to be changing with time. While Iran has sustained its steady stream of strikes on infrastructure with strategic military and economic value inside Israel, particularly energy facilities, the US has gradually slowed down the pace of its own operations. Intelligence reports show that US airstrikes have declined sharply over the past week, with Israel now conducting several times more attacks than previously. One reason for this is said to be the increasing strain on US weapons stockpiles. At the same time, due to the rising financial and economic costs of the war, domestic political pressure on Trump is increasing with rallies in major US cities demanding an end to the war.

On the other hand, Israel is adamant on maintaining military pressure on Iran and has gradually expanded the scope of its war operations. In this context, it is interesting to note that President Donald Trump a few days ago demanded an "unconditional surrender" by the Islamic Republic. But within hours, President Masoud Pezeshkian of the beleaguered nation retorted: "they will take their dreams of Iranian

people surrendering unconditionally to their grave." Trump did not raise the subject again.

It may be added here that a well informed group of international observers analysing the course of the war says that the war is not going America's way. An indication of this is the number of direct hits that US assets, most notably THAAD and Patriot radars and batteries, have taken, exposing the vulnerability of Gulf allies and the Zionist state itself. It has also been reported that as the existing supplies of missiles and related material held by the US in the Middle East are near exhaustion, the US military high command is now considering to move its missile defence assets positioned in South Korea

the ground" and two days later says that would be a "waste of time". According to some critics, Trump's confused state of mind has something to do with Netanyahu having in his possession some damning evidence against him from the Epstein 'video archives'.

The war that the US has ignited has put the whole world on edge. A large number of countries are faced with the prospect of a disruption in oil supply due to the Strait of Hormuz's closure. Oil prices have already risen by 25 per cent in a month and may breach the \$125 a barrel barrier. Rising prices at the petrol pumps and their impact on the US stock markets will create their own pressure for hostili-



and Taiwan to the Middle East.

But there is another group of analysts which is of the view that the war is going well for the US as it has led to widespread destruction of Iranian nuclear and missile production and launch capability and that America's ascendancy in the air means that their drones can hover over underground facilities and direct heavy bombers to targets accurately.

President Trump is totally confused about the objectives of the war. He has been widely criticised for lack of clarity about what he wants to achieve. The confusion is evident from the fact that for Trump the objectives of the war have shifted from the elimination of the nuclear programme to regime change to the destruction of Iran's long-range missile capability. Trump talks one day about putting "boots on

ties to end.

The strait's closure will also result in a major hit to the oil and gas and trading and tourism industry of the Gulf states. Qatar has warned that if its gas revenues continue to face disruptions, it might be forced to disinvest in the US. This will be a severe jolt to the US economy and may spell disaster for Trump's political future.

Among other things, the war has made the Gulf states realise that in the future they will have to fend for themselves as the so-called security umbrella provided by the US did not save them from Iranian missiles and drones. This may lead to a realignment of relations between the Gulf states and Iran and a new political contract for peaceful co-existence and stability in the region.

The paper recovery?

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan's economic managers have repeatedly highlighted improvements in key macroeconomic indicators, pointing to rising foreign exchange reserves, relative currency stability, controlled inflation, and the current account surplus recorded last year as signs of economic stabilization. These indicators, officials argue, demonstrate that policy measures and fiscal discipline are gradually putting the country's economy back on a stable path.

However, a deeper examination of the data, along with growing public dissatisfaction, suggests that the reality may be more complex than the official narrative implies. While certain economic indicators have improved on the surface, structural weaknesses and public concerns about living standards continue to cast doubt on the sustainability of the recovery.

One of the most significant insights into the state of Pakistan's external sector came from State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) Governor Jameel Ahmad, who recently disclosed that the central bank had purchased approximately \$24 billion from the domestic market over the past three years to build up its foreign exchange reserves.

At first glance, the rise in reserves appears to be a positive development. Stronger reserves generally signal improved economic resilience, allowing a country to manage external shocks, stabilize its currency, and meet international payment obligations.

However, the way Pakistan's reserves have been accumulated raises important questions about long-term sustainability. Instead of being built primarily through export earnings, foreign direct investment, or other non-debt inflows, a large portion of the reserves has been accumulated by purchasing dollars already circulating within the local economy.

This approach may have provided short-term stability, but it does little to strengthen the underlying foundations of the external sector. In essence, the strategy shifts existing foreign currency within the system rather than generating new inflows that could support long-term economic growth.

Even the current level of foreign exchange reserves reflects Pakistan's reliance on external financial assistance. Of the roughly \$16 billion currently held by the SBP, more than three-quarters consists of deposits from friendly countries.

These deposits—primarily provided by countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and China—offer critical short-term support for Pakistan's economy. They help stabilize reserves, reassure financial markets, and enable the government to meet external financing needs.

However, their presence also highlights the structural fragility of Pakistan's external accounts. Since these funds are not permanent inflows, they must be rolled over periodically, creating a degree of uncertainty for economic planners.

The UAE's recent decision to shift from annual to monthly rollovers of its deposits illustrates this vulnerability. Although the move does not pose an immediate threat, it underscores the limitations of relying heavily on the goodwill and financial support of friendly nations. Any change in these arrangements could quickly affect Pakistan's reserve position.

Another major challenge facing Pakistan's economy is the potential impact of rising global oil prices, particularly in light of escalating tensions in the Middle East. As a country heavily dependent on imported energy, Pakistan remains highly vulnerable to fluctuations in international oil markets. If global crude oil prices were to climb to around \$100 per barrel, Pakistan's monthly import bill could increase by as much as \$300 million. Such an increase would place significant pressure on the country's balance of payments. A higher import bill would likely widen the current account deficit and reduce foreign exchange reserves, potentially putting downward pressure on the Pakistani rupee. For an economy that has only recently stabilized its external sector, such developments could reverse hard-earned gains.

Moreover, geopolitical instability in the Middle East also threatens other critical economic flows, including remittances from overseas Pakistani workers employed in Gulf countries. Any prolonged disruption in the region's economic activity could have far-reaching implications for Pakistan's financial stability.

Beyond the numbers, public sentiment offers another important perspective on the state of the economy. Despite the government's claims of stabilization, many Pakistanis remain skeptical about the country's economic direction.

According to a recent survey, only about one in four Pakistanis believes that the national economy is strong. The majority of respondents described economic conditions as weak, reflecting widespread concerns about inflation, unemployment, and declining purchasing power.

Even more troubling is the lack of optimism about the future. Only about one-third of those surveyed expect economic conditions to improve in the next six months. Meanwhile, just 16 percent expressed confidence in making new investments.

This pessimism highlights a disconnect between macroeconomic indicators and the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens.

For many households across Pakistan, the

stabilization frequently cited by policymakers has yet to translate into meaningful economic relief. While inflation may have moderated compared to previous peaks, the cost of living remains high for millions of families.

In recent years, rising utility prices, increased fuel costs, and higher taxes have placed considerable strain on household budgets. At the same time, job opportunities remain limited, particularly for young people entering the workforce.

Economic growth has been uneven, with benefits concentrated in certain sectors while large segments of the population continue to struggle. As a result, poverty levels have increased and income inequality has widened.

This gap between official economic indicators and public experience helps explain why confidence in the economy remains low.

Pakistan's policymakers therefore face a complex challenge. Maintaining macroeconomic stability remains essential, particularly in managing external sector risks such as volatile energy prices, fragile reserves, and geopolitical uncertainty.

At the same time, stabilization alone is not enough to ensure long-term prosperity. The country must undertake deeper structural reforms aimed at strengthening the productive base of the economy.

These reforms should focus on expanding export capacity, improving the business environment, and attracting foreign investment. Diversifying energy sources and reducing dependence on imported fuel could also help protect the economy from global price shocks.

Equally important is the creation of sustainable employment opportunities. A growing and youthful population requires a dynamic economy capable of generating jobs and supporting rising living standards.

Pakistan's economy appears to be at a crossroads. While certain macroeconomic indicators suggest progress toward stability, underlying structural weaknesses and public skepticism highlight the challenges that remain.

The buildup of foreign exchange reserves through domestic market purchases and reliance on external deposits offers only temporary relief rather than long-term security. At the same time, rising global oil prices and geopolitical tensions threaten to place additional strain on the country's external sector.

For policymakers, the task ahead is twofold: preserving economic stability while implementing meaningful reforms that promote investment, boost exports, and create employment. Only by addressing these structural issues can Pakistan move beyond short-term stabilization and achieve sustainable economic growth that benefits the broader population.

New hurdles for Pakistan's economy

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's economic outlook faces renewed uncertainty as escalating tensions in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf threaten to disrupt global energy markets and increase economic pressures at home. The Ministry of Planning has warned that the growing conflict in the region could push up oil prices, intensify inflation, and weaken the country's export competitiveness due to rising production and transportation costs.

In its latest 'Monthly Development Outlook', the ministry highlighted the potential economic consequences of the geopolitical situation, emphasizing that Pakistan's external sector remains particularly vulnerable to volatility in global energy and financial markets. While the country has made notable progress toward economic stabilization during the current fiscal year, the report cautions that rising oil prices and regional instability could create new challenges for policymakers.

One of the primary concerns highlighted in the report is the potential surge in oil prices triggered by disruptions in the Middle East. The strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly 20 percent of the world's oil supply passes, remains a crucial route for global energy shipments. Any disturbance in this area could significantly affect oil supplies and prices worldwide.

For Pakistan, which relies heavily on imported petroleum products, such disruptions could sharply increase the country's import bill. According to the report, petroleum products account for nearly one-quarter of Pakistan's total imports, and more than 85 percent of these imports originate from Middle Eastern countries.

A rise in global oil prices would therefore have an immediate impact on the national economy. In fact, the government has already announced a major increase of Rs55 per liter in the prices of petrol and diesel, reflecting the pressure on domestic fuel markets.

Higher fuel costs do not only affect transportation and energy sectors but also ripple through the entire economy. Industries face increased production expenses, while higher freight costs make exports less competitive in international markets. This combination could weaken Pakistan's export performance at a time when the country is striving to improve its trade balance.

The ministry also pointed out that

Pakistan's trade relations with Middle Eastern countries could face additional strain if regional tensions escalate further. Approximately 11 percent of Pakistan's exports are destined for Middle Eastern markets. Any disruption in regional economic activity or trade routes could therefore affect export volumes.

Another critical factor is the flow of remittances from overseas Pakistanis working in Gulf countries. An estimated 4.5 to 5 million Pakistanis are employed across the region, and the money they send back home constitutes more than half of Pakistan's total remittance inflows.

If the conflict in the region persists or worsens, economic conditions in Gulf states could weaken, potentially affecting employment opportunities for expatriate workers.



This scenario would pose a serious challenge for Pakistan, as remittances play a vital role in supporting the country's foreign exchange reserves and stabilizing the external account.

The report also noted that the evolving situation could influence exchange rate stability, foreign investment flows, and overall fiscal pressures. As global markets react to geopolitical developments, investor confidence may fluctuate, making it harder for emerging economies like Pakistan to attract investment.

To mitigate these risks, the ministry emphasized the need for energy diversification, stronger export facilitation measures, and contingency planning to safeguard overseas workers and maintain external sector stability.

Despite the potential risks posed by geopolitical tensions, the report highlighted encouraging developments in Pakistan's economy during the first eight months of the fiscal year 2026. According to the ministry, prudent macroeconomic management and coordinated policy measures have contributed to improved economic stability.

Inflation, which had remained a major concern in previous years, showed signs of moderation between July and February of the current fiscal year. Although a temporary spike occurred in February due to adjustments in electricity prices, overall inflation trends have eased compared with earlier periods.

The industrial sector also demonstrated signs of recovery. Large-scale manufacturing recorded cumulative growth during the Ju-

ly-December period of fiscal year 2026, reversing the contraction observed in the previous year. This improvement indicates a gradual revival in economic activity.

Key industries such as construction and automobiles showed particularly strong momentum, reflecting increased domestic demand and renewed business confidence.

Pakistan's exports of goods and services have remained relatively resilient despite global economic uncertainties. The services sector, in particular, has experienced robust growth, providing additional support to export earnings.

At the same time, imports have increased as economic activity gradually recovers. While

rising imports often raise concerns about the trade deficit, the report noted that higher imports in this case reflect improving industrial production and domestic demand.

Remittances from overseas Pakistanis have continued to provide a stable source of foreign exchange, helping to support the country's external sector. This steady inflow of funds has played an important role in maintaining financial stability.

On the fiscal front, the government has also made progress in improving revenue collection. Tax receipts from the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) have increased, contributing to better fiscal performance. As a result, the fiscal balance has turned positive, signaling improved financial discipline.

The government has continued to prioritize development spending to stimulate economic growth and generate employment opportunities. Under the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) for the fiscal year 2025-26, around Rs361 billion—equivalent to 36 percent of the total allocation—has already been utilized. Significant investments have been directed toward infrastructure development, social sector projects, and initiatives in special areas. These projects are expected to create approximately 18,336 direct jobs and an

additional 7,320 indirect employment opportunities over the medium term.

Efforts to rationalize costs have also produced tangible results. Between July and January of fiscal year 2026, the government achieved savings of nearly Rs9.9 billion through improved resource management and efficiency measures.

Additionally, Pakistan engaged in several international economic initiatives during February, including the Pakistan Governance Forum 2026, the release of preliminary poverty estimates, and discussions with the International Monetary Fund and other development partners. The country also launched a five-year economic cooperation roadmap with Kazakhstan, aiming to strengthen bilateral trade and investment.

Looking ahead, the ministry remains cautiously optimistic about Pakistan's economic trajectory. The report suggests that stabilization is likely to continue if current policy measures remain effective and external uncertainties remain manageable.

Improving macroeconomic indicators—such as moderating inflation, industrial recovery, strong remittance inflows, and steady fiscal performance—offer encouraging signs for the economy. However, the report stressed

that external risks, particularly rising global oil prices and geopolitical tensions, could still undermine these gains.

Regional instability linked to ongoing conflict involving Iran and other Middle Eastern developments may widen Pakistan's trade and current account deficits. Investor confidence could also weaken if geopolitical risks intensify, potentially slowing economic progress.

Pakistan's economy is currently facing a delicate balance between recovery and uncertainty. While recent months have brought encouraging signs of stabilization—such as easing inflation, improved industrial performance, and stronger fiscal management—the escalating conflict in the Middle East poses significant risks.

Rising oil prices, potential disruptions in trade and remittances, and broader geopolitical instability could create new economic pressures in the coming months. For Pakistan, the challenge will be to sustain its economic recovery while preparing for external shocks. Strengthening energy diversification, expanding export capacity, and safeguarding overseas workers will be critical steps in ensuring long-term economic resilience in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Pakistan–Taliban tensions enter a new phase

Raza Khan

The statement by Pakistan's Defence Minister, Khwaja Asif, that his country was in an "open war" with the Afghan Taliban regime, along with reports quoting unnamed senior Pakistani military officials who warned that Islamabad would continue attacks inside Afghan territory unless Kabul took verifiable action against militant groups, has significantly escalated tensions between the two sides. These developments have raised fears of a further expansion of armed conflict between Islamabad and Kabul, particularly as Pakistan has reportedly ruled out holding further dialogue with the Afghan Taliban on the issue of the Afghanistan-based Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The current confrontation began in late February following a series of persistent attacks by the TTP—a group that the Pakistani state now labels Fitna-tul-Khawarij. In response to these attacks, Pakistan carried out air strikes inside Afghanistan targeting alleged militant hideouts. According to reports, the strikes were conducted in at least six Afghan provinces as well as the capital city, Kabul, hitting what Islamabad

described as terrorist infrastructure and Afghan military installations.

In retaliation, Afghan Taliban forces reportedly launched artillery and mortar attacks on six Pakistani districts in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The exchange marked one of the most serious military confrontations between the two sides since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan. Pakistan subsequently intensified its air operations, targeting militant sanctuaries and Afghan military positions in the southern Afghan provinces of Kandahar Province and Helmand Province. These regions are widely considered the political and ideological heartland of the Afghan Taliban movement.

Significantly, these strikes appear to be the first time Pakistan has directly targeted Taliban strongholds in southern Afghanistan since the group returned to power in 2021—and arguably the first such action since the Taliban movement itself emerged in 1994. The escalation is particularly noteworthy given Pakistan's historical role as the principal supporter of the Afghan Taliban. Islamabad was instrumental in helping the Taliban seize power in Afghanistan in 1996 and

became the first country to formally recognize the regime. Pakistan also persuaded its close allies, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, to extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government at that time.

However, during their first period in power from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban hosted a range of militant and terrorist organizations from different parts of the world, including groups from the Middle East, South Asia, China, Southeast Asia and even Europe. Among these was Al-Qaeda, which carried out the devastating attacks on the United States on September 11 attacks. Following those attacks, a US-led coalition under NATO intervened in Afghanistan and removed the Taliban regime from power in November 2001.

From 2001 until 2021, the Taliban waged a prolonged insurgency against the US-backed Afghan government. Throughout this period, many Taliban leaders and their families reportedly lived in Pakistan, often with varying degrees of official tolerance or support. Meanwhile, the TTP—which had emerged as the largest Pakistani militant network—found refuge across the border in Afghanistan after being driven out of Pakistan by

military operations.

The eventual collapse of the Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani in 2021 occurred after the withdrawal of US and NATO forces. That withdrawal was carried out under the framework of the Doha Agreement signed in February 2020 between the United States and the Afghan Taliban. Ironically, Pakistan played an important role in facilitating negotiations that led to this agreement.

Under the Doha Agreement, the Taliban had pledged to renounce militant activity, allow the formation of an inclusive political system in Afghanistan and ensure that Afghan territory would not be used by militant groups to threaten other countries. Most importantly, they committed that Afghanistan would not serve as a safe haven for foreign militant organizations.

However, since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban have been widely accused by Pakistani officials of allowing the TTP to operate freely from Afghan territory. Islamabad maintains that the Afghan Taliban have not only failed to restrain the group but have indirectly encouraged it to carry out attacks inside Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. If these accusations are accurate, they would represent a clear violation of the commitments made under the Doha Agreement and reinforce the perception that those

assurances were largely tactical promises aimed at facilitating the Taliban's return to power.

Against this background, Pakistan's declaration of an "open war" with the Afghan Taliban appears to reflect growing frustration within the country's leadership. Several rounds of negotiations between Pakistani officials and Taliban representatives — at times even involving commanders of the TTP — failed to produce any meaningful progress. The fundamental obstacle has been Kabul's unwillingness to sever ties with the TTP. Pakistan has repeatedly asked the Taliban regime to make a clear choice between maintaining relations with the TTP, which Islamabad considers a terrorist organization, and preserving stable relations with Pakistan, its most important neighbour and former benefactor.

So far, Islamabad believes that the Taliban leadership has effectively chosen to support the TTP. This perception has created a deep sense of

disillusionment and betrayal within Pakistan's political and security establishment. Many in Pakistan's leadership now view the Taliban regime as a hostile actor that is enabling terrorism against Pakistan while simultaneously refusing to address Islamabad's security concerns.

As a result, Pakistan's policy toward the Afghan Taliban appears to be undergoing a significant shift. Increasingly, the regime in Kabul is being portrayed not as a partner but as a militant authority that seized power through armed force and continues to behave more like an insurgent movement than a responsible state. From Islamabad's perspective, such a regime cannot be trusted and must be treated as a security threat.

A recent report in a Pakistani newspaper quoted a senior unnamed security official as saying



that Pakistan would not hesitate to target the top leadership of the Afghan Taliban if credible intelligence justified such action. This could potentially include the movement's reclusive supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. Such statements represent a very serious escalation in rhetoric and underscore the deteriorating nature of relations between the two sides.

At the same time, Pakistani officials emphasize that tensions with the Taliban regime should not be confused with Pakistan's relations with the Afghan people, which have historically remained close and largely positive. Pakistan has increasingly highlighted the human rights situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, arguing that the regime has once again imposed severe restrictions and committed widespread violations against Afghan citizens.

Within Afghanistan itself, the Taliban remain controversial. While the group has restored

a degree of stability after years of war, its rule is widely criticized for its authoritarian policies and severe limitations on political freedoms, education and women's rights. Many Afghans have long believed that the Taliban were initially empowered with Pakistan's support — a perception that has shaped public attitudes toward Pakistan over the years.

If Islamabad now clearly distances itself from the Taliban regime, it may gradually help reshape Afghan public opinion toward Pakistan in the long run. Such a shift could potentially improve relations between Pakistan and Afghan society even if tensions with the Taliban leadership continue.

Meanwhile, armed opposition to the Taliban is also re-emerging. The National Resistance

Front led by Ahmad Massoud — the son of the famed anti-Soviet commander Ahmad Shah Massoud — has vowed to intensify its struggle against the Taliban regime. Ahmad Shah Massoud was widely respected for his resistance to both Soviet forces and later Taliban rule, and his legacy continues to inspire opposition movements in Afghanistan.

Given the current trajectory, the prospects for negotiations between Pakistan and the Taliban regime appear extremely limited. The situation is therefore likely to deteriorate further in the coming months. Much will depend on how aggressively Pakistan chooses to pursue the TTP inside Afghan territory and how the Taliban leadership responds to continued Pakistani military pressure. The risk is that what has so far been a series of cross-border strikes could evolve into a broader and more sustained conflict between the two neighbours.

Fueling the fire: The high cost of divided austerity

Shahid Hussain

The decision to hike petrol and diesel prices by Rs55 per litre each has sent shockwaves through the country, where inflation has already eroded household incomes and weakened purchasing power. For millions of Pakistanis struggling to manage daily expenses, the announcement has felt less like an unavoidable economic adjustment and more like another heavy blow.

While authorities have justified the move by pointing to the international oil price surge, critics question the timing and scale of the increase. Pakistan still holds fuel stocks imported at earlier, lower global prices, meaning these supplies will now be sold domestically at the highest rates ever seen in the country. This has strengthened the perception that the government is using the crisis as an opportunity to extract additional revenue rather than cushion the impact on consumers.

Public frustration has been amplified by comparisons with neighbouring countries. Despite facing similar international market conditions, several regional economies have chosen to absorb part of the price shock through subsidies or tax adjustments to protect their populations. In Pakistan's case, however, the entire burden appears to have been transferred to citizens almost immediately.

Fuel prices in Pakistan rarely remain an isolated issue. When petrol and diesel become more expensive, the effects quickly ripple across the entire economy. Transportation costs rise first, pushing up fares for buses, taxis and ride-hailing services. Soon after, the prices of food, groceries and essential commodities begin to climb as the cost of moving goods from farms and factories to markets increases.

Delivery services and logistics companies also raise their charges, which in turn inflates the price of nearly everything people buy. In an economy already grappling with persistent inflation, the Rs55 increase threatens to ignite another wave of price hikes that will hit households in every corner of the country.

What has intensified public resentment even further is the contrast between the government's claims of austerity and the reality of its spending patterns. Over the past few years, authorities have repeatedly called on citizens to tighten their belts and accept economic sacrifices in the interest of fiscal stability. Yet government expenditure has continued to grow at a rapid pace.

Between fiscal year 2023 and fiscal year 2026, combined spending by federal and provincial governments has risen by around 60 percent in nominal terms. Even when interest payments are excluded, non-interest expenditure has expanded by roughly 70 percent during the same period. Such increases have raised serious questions about whether genuine austerity measures are being implemented within the state apparatus itself.

A significant portion of this spending growth has gone toward maintaining and expanding benefits for the country's powerful institutions and political elite. Salaries, allowances and pensions for bureaucrats, parliamentarians and members of the judiciary have all seen substantial increases. At the same time, discretionary



funds allocated to lawmakers have continued to grow, allowing them to finance projects in their constituencies.

Development spending has also surged dramatically. Often described as “pork barrel” expenditure, these allocations are widely viewed as a tool used by ruling coalition politicians to channel taxpayer money toward politically advantageous projects. Such spending has increased from around Rs1.9 trillion in the 2022–23 fiscal year to a budgeted Rs3.1 trillion for 2025–26, including federal Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) funds and provincial Annual Development Programmes (ADPs).

Against this backdrop, calls for austerity directed at ordinary citizens appear increasingly hollow. Many people argue that if the country truly faces a financial emergency, the government should begin by reducing its own expenditures and privileges rather than repeatedly imposing new costs on the public.

Fuel allowances for government officials have become a particularly contentious issue in this debate. Critics argue that while citizens

struggle to afford petrol for their motorcycles and small cars, high-ranking officials continue to enjoy generous state-funded transport benefits. Under policies adopted in various provinces, senior bureaucrats are entitled to multiple vehicles and large monthly fuel allocations.

Such privileges have drawn strong criticism from citizens who believe that austerity should start at the top. Many have demanded the suspension or reduction of fuel allowances for government officials during periods of economic stress. They argue that symbolic measures like these could help restore some public trust and demonstrate that the burden of economic adjustment is being shared fairly.

However, the broader concern goes beyond government perks. Economists warn that the scale of the latest fuel increase could push already strained households to the brink. With wages largely stagnant and unemployment remaining a persistent problem, many families are struggling to maintain their standard of living.

A sharp rise in transport costs alone can consume a significant portion of a worker's monthly income. For small business owners, higher fuel prices mean increased operational expenses that are often passed on to customers. Farmers also face rising costs for operating machinery and transporting crops, which can ultimately drive up food prices.

All these factors combine to create a chain reaction that spreads through the economy, intensifying inflation and deepening inequality. Those with fixed incomes or limited financial resources are usually the hardest hit, as they have little ability to absorb sudden increases in living costs.

The government may view the latest fuel price adjustment as a necessary response to global market conditions, but for ordinary Pakistanis it represents something far more immediate and personal. Every litre of petrol now carries a heavier financial burden, one that will be felt not only at fuel stations but in markets, workplaces and homes across the country.

Ultimately, the real impact of this decision will be measured not in fiscal figures but in the daily struggles of citizens trying to make ends meet. As transport fares climb, food prices rise and household budgets shrink further, the latest petrol hike risks pushing millions closer to economic hardship—reinforcing the growing perception that in Pakistan's cycle of austerity, it is always the common people who pay the highest price.

White gold, bitter harvest

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Barar

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

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

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

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

monopoly crowds out wheat, pulses, and oilseeds, forcing imports that ballooned the food bill by 15 percent last fiscal year.

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

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

Environmental tolls amplify the folly. Sugarcane guzzles 1,500-2,000 millimeters of water per hectare—double cotton's needs—exacerbating scarcity in the Indus Basin, where groundwater tables rise perilously, salinizing soils and turning arable tracts into barren salinas. In Rahim Yar Khan, excessive irrigation has depleted millions of acre-feet, fostering salinity that slashes yields by 20-30 percent over time and erodes biodiversity.

Soil health deteriorates too: ratooning depletes nutrients, demanding heavy fertilizers that pollute waterways and spike effluent from mills, with biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) levels from sugar processing contaminating groundwater and rivers. Climate change compounds this: erratic monsoons and heatwaves, projected to cut sugarcane yields 10-15 percent by 2030, strain already overtaxed aquifers. The 2022 floods, which ravaged 80 percent of Balochistan's crops, underscore how such imbalances leave systems brittle, with staples like wheat displaced and food inflation hovering at 12 percent.

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

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

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

It is time for the world to move on without the United States

C Justin Robinson

On February 28, the United States and Israel launched a war on Iran. The US-Israeli attacks came without prior warning or approval by the United Nations and targeted and killed Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Just two months earlier, the US launched another attack on Venezuela, in which its special forces kidnapped Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro from his residence in Caracas and transferred him to New York, where he faces criminal charges in federal court.

In between these two violent attacks, US President Donald Trump withdrew from 66 international organisations, including 31 UN entities, and launched the Board of Peace, a new institution he chairs personally that he suggested might replace the UN. These and other developments in recent years demonstrate that the world order the US helped establish in 1945 no longer serves its interests.

For eight decades, US treasury, diplomacy and military power sustained this architecture. Whatever one's criticisms of how that power was exercised, the scale of the commitment was remarkable, and the US did not have to do this. It chose to.

The world of 2026 bears little resemblance to 1945. Europe has rebuilt. China has risen. Canada, Japan, South Korea and many Gulf States are rich. and Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, India, Vietnam and other countries are on the rise. Today's threats – climate change, pandemics, terrorism and others – were barely imaginable when the UN Charter was drafted. It is not unreasonable for Americans to ask why they should continue bearing a disproportionate burden for a system designed for a world that no longer exists.

The question is what the rest of the world intends to do. For too long, multilateralism has been something the US provided and others consumed. European nations sheltered under American security guarantees while criticising US foreign policy. Developing nations demanded institutional reforms while relying on American funding. Small states like those of the Caribbean invoked international law as our shield while contributing little to enforce it.

If we truly value this system, we must now demonstrate that value with resources, not merely rhetoric. A powerful first step would be relocating the UN headquarters from New

York as an acknowledgment of reality. Why should the world body remain in a nation that is withdrawing from so many of its parts and building alternatives?

Relocation would signal that the international community intends to preserve multilateralism regardless of American participation and that we are prepared to bear the costs of doing so. And there are many options for where the UN can be based. Geneva and Vienna can offer neutrality. Nairobi and Rio de Janeiro would centre the organisation in the Global South.

An island nation is also an option: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Jamaica or Mauritius. Such a choice would underscore that



this is now an institution for the vulnerable, not the powerful. If the world can mobilise trillions for wars and bailouts, it can fund a headquarters move.

More fundamentally, the UN requires a new funding model. The US has provided roughly 22 percent of the regular budget and far more for peacekeeping. This dependency gave Washington outsized influence and made the organisation hostage to US domestic politics. If we value multilateralism, we must fill the gap. The European Union, China, Japan, the Gulf states and emerging economies must contribute commensurate with their stake in a functioning international order. A diversified funding base would ensure survival and democratise global governance in ways long overdue.

The urgency of these reforms is underscored by the crises now unfolding. The attacks on Iran risk a wider regional conflagration that could draw in the Gulf states, disrupt global energy supplies and tip fragile economies into recession. The abduction of Venezuela's president has destabilised Latin America and set a

precedent that no sovereign leader is beyond the reach of unilateral force.

Meanwhile, the wars in Gaza and Sudan grind on, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo remains engulfed in conflict and millions of displaced people strain the capacity of neighbouring states. In each case, the UN Security Council has proven unable or unwilling to act, paralysed by the very veto structure that privileges the powerful over the vulnerable.

A relocated and revitalised United Nations, funded broadly and no longer beholden to a single patron, would not resolve these crises overnight. But it could act with greater legitimacy and less selective morality.

It could authorise humanitarian corridors without fear that one member's geopolitical interests will block action. It could convene emergency sessions on energy price stabilisation, coordinate debt relief for nations pushed to the brink by conflict-driven commodity shocks and deploy peacekeeping missions that are not contingent on one country's budgetary politics. The point is not that a reformed UN would be perfect. It is that the current one is structurally incapable of responding to the very emergencies that demand collective action.

Every month of inaction widens the gap between what the institution promises and what it delivers, eroding the faith of the most vulnerable nations that multilateralism is worth defending at all. Climate architecture also requires particular urgency of action. The American withdrawal from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change threatens the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund, and Loss and Damage mechanisms. For Small Island Developing States and other climate-vulnerable countries, these are lifelines, not abstractions.

The window for building climate finance independent of US participation is narrow, but it exists. Europe must demonstrate its climate leadership with resources. China, the world's largest emitter, has the capacity to become a major contributor if it wishes to claim moral leadership.

For the Caribbean, this transformation demands both humility and ambition. Humility because we have long relied on frameworks we did little to fund. Ambition because we have 14 UN General Assembly votes, moral authority from the front lines of climate change and a tradition of punching above our weight.

We, the American people, have had enough of endless wars

Hussam Ayloush

The United States has once again been dragged into a catastrophic war in the Middle East. The US military is now attacking Iran not because our nation faces an imminent threat but because the Israeli government has long sought confrontation with Tehran and has finally found a willing partner in Washington.

This war is unnecessary, unjustified, unconstitutional, in violation of international law and entirely against the will of the American public.

Under the constitution, the power to declare war rests with Congress, not the president. Therefore, President Donald Trump's decision to launch air strikes and pursue regime change in another country without congressional authorisation is illegal. It echoes the darkest chapters of post-9/11 American foreign policy when fear and deception were used to rush our nation into disastrous wars, the price of which we are still paying today.

On the global scale, attacking a sovereign nation – or as wanted war criminal Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls it, launching a “preemptive strike” – without an imminent threat violates the United Nations Charter and fundamental principles of international law. The bombing campaign – which is taking place during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, a time of increased spirituality and reflection – has already stained our national conscience.

On the first day of the war, a US air strike killed about 165 schoolgirls in the city of Minab. American weapons have once again made us complicit in the killing of children abroad.

We are told this is about “security”. We are told this is about stopping Iran's nuclear ambitions. But we've heard this before. For more than 30 years, Netanyahu has insisted that Iran is “weeks away” from a nuclear bomb. Those weeks have stretched into decades. Fear has been recycled as policy.

Let's also be honest about something else: Iran, with all its objectionable and often detrimental regional ambitions, is not an imminent military threat to the United States. The American public understands this. Poll after poll shows Americans are weary of endless wars in the Middle East. Our communities

want investments in healthcare, education, infrastructure and job creation – not another trillion-dollar conflict that sends our soldiers into harm's way and destabilises yet another region.

So why is an American president who campaigned on “America First” governing as if he embraces “Israel First”? Why are American troops, American tax dollars and American credibility being placed on the line to fulfil the longstanding ambitions of a foreign government?

This is not a healthy alliance. It is a toxic dynamic in which the United States provides money, weapons, diplomatic cover and

questions. At a time when transparency and accountability are demanded at home, especially as it pertains to the release of the Jeffrey Epstein files, why are we instead being thrust into another foreign war? The American people deserve honesty, not distraction.

This war will not bring stability. It will inflame the region, harm civilians, endanger US soldiers and potentially trigger a wider conflict with global consequences. It risks American lives and American security for objectives that do not serve the American public. Congress had a chance to uphold its constitutional responsibility and stop unauthorised military escalation but failed to pass the war powers



unconditional political support while being dragged into wars that make us less safe. We are told this war is about human rights. About women's rights. But bombs do not liberate people. Air strikes do not advance democracy. Slaughtering schoolgirls is not “feminist” foreign policy.

If human rights were truly the concern, our government would not selectively apply them based on geopolitical convenience. Our own ally, Israel, is engaged in a genocide that has killed and wounded more than 200,000 Palestinians, most of them civilians. Not funding that mass murder of children would have been a good start for our humanitarian concerns.

And Americans are right to ask these

resolution sponsored by Representatives Thomas Massie and Ro Khanna. This vote reflects the strong influence of the Israeli lobbying group AIPAC and its money along with a troubling unwillingness by some lawmakers to stand up to powerful lobbying interests and unchecked executive power.

Congress, especially those members who claim to oppose endless wars, must continue pursuing every available avenue to reassert its authority and prevent further escalation; the stakes are far too high for elected officials to remain silent.

The American people do not want this war. It is time for our government to serve them, not the agenda of a foreign leader desperate to cling to power and evade accountability.

Beyond the prescription: The case for integrated mental healthcare in Pakistan

One fundamental question about mental health issues — ‘are we addressing the roots of distress or merely managing its symptoms?’ — begs serious attention. There are two treatment models operative in Pakistan; psychiatry and psychotherapy. The first is primarily based on medication, while the second is based on healing the repressed wounds through personal change and growth. The rivalry between these two models tends to deny the patients the collaborative professional advice for rapid healing.

The deeper root causes of mental health challenges in our cultural context include inequalities that cause distress. The incidence of drug addiction is endemic in the dispossessed population, but it is also prevalent in the upper echelon of society.

In the middle and upper-middle classes, however, the broken interpersonal relationships are the major cause for mental health issues. For instance, in the primary parental caring system, a father — domineering, disciplinarian and an authoritarian in attitude — can lead to repressed mental conditions. If untreated, such conditions can retard organic growth of a child. I have also witnessed a large number of cases where an overbearing mother ends up suppressing the genuine desire of the daughter for freedom to act independently and to avoid dependence.

The primary reason for this is the insecurity of the mother which compels her to protect the daughter from social vulnerabilities. Overall, in my experience the root cause of a large majority of the mental health cases is the consequence of shattered or unhealthy interpersonal relationships.

This is a serious challenge for integrated human development and a planned policy intervention is required from the government. Meanwhile, I feel a collaborative model of mental health, rather than an adversarial professional model, is needed in Pakistan.

Neither the psychiatry model of medicine nor the psychotherapy model can meet the challenge alone. In my professional view, the field of psychotherapeutic models needs government patronage to facilitate the needy ones in growing up as integrated personalities rather than fragmented ones.

Dr Zafar Iqbal Qureshi
Lahore

The stolen game

In many areas of Balochistan, there is only one sports ground, and that is used exclusively by boys. Girls are either not allowed, or are not provided a safe and appropriate environment to play. Time and again, our girls have proven that they can excel in any field.

Physical activities are not only about games; they build confidence, discipline, teamwork, mental strength and physical health. Denying girls access to sports grounds is denying them a healthy and balanced future. There should be separate grounds for girls, qualified women coaches, proper equipment and encouragement from the authorities.

Mahal Hassni
Hub

An overburdened Metro

The Rawalpindi-Islamabad Metro Bus system serves an estimated 150,000 passengers daily, making it a vital lifeline for affordable public transport in the twin cities. However, the evening peak hours bring significant challenges. Despite buses arriving every 4-8 minutes, overcrowding is common, with vehicles frequently running at full capacity. Commuters often face long waits marked by pushing and shoving at platforms, and then come the uncomfortable journeys as people have to stand in packed aisles. This daily ordeal particularly affects women, the elderly, and those with children. The Punjab Mass Transit Authority and relevant officials must address the issue by increasing the number of buses during peak hours, optimising schedules, or introducing express services on high-demand routes.

Haider Hayat Khan
Bannu

Karachi's cages of shame

I recently visited a bird market in Karachi, and what I witnessed was deeply distressing. Wild animals, including jackals, barn owls, kites, monkeys and mongooses, were confined to cages. One jackal hissed at a passer-by and threw itself repeatedly against the cage in fear.

Barn owls sat in cramped enclosures with flies swarming over rotting meat. A terrified monkey was being harassed by children striking its cage with sticks. Puppies, kittens and monkeys, separated from their mothers, were displayed as merchandise. Looking into their frightened eyes, one could hardly sustain eye contact. Further, migratory birds were confined to cages that barely allowed them space to stand.

This inhumane trade is a stark reminder that laws often exist only on paper. Such activity takes place openly, raising serious questions about the authorities and their conduct. How can protected species be sold in plain sight without official intervention?

Moreover, beyond regulatory failure, this reflects a deeper moral decline. When living beings are reduced to merchandise, suffering becomes normalised. The mistreatment of voiceless animals fosters a culture where empathy erodes, and that erosion eventually shows in how humans treat each other.

The authorities must act immediately,

enforce wildlife protection laws, conduct regular inspections, and shut down this illegal trade. Turning a blind eye enables cruelty and diminishes our humanity.

Sohaib Qureshi
Jamshoro

Concrete jungles vs. food baskets

Every now and then in Pakistan, fertile land quietly disappears under layers of concrete, bricks and roads. This change does not happen overnight. The rapid rise in population and the unplanned, hap-hazard growth of cities and towns are creating a serious problem in the shape of land degradation and loss of productive farmland. If this trend continues unchecked, Pakistan's food security will face severe risks in the coming years.

One of the major causes of land loss is urban sprawl. Cities in Pakistan are expanding both horizontally and vertically. Housing colonies, commercial plazas and road networks are spreading like a cancer, slowly eating away fertile agricultural land. It is estimated that around 10 square kilometres of productive farmland are lost every single day due to urban expansion. This means nearly 3,650 square kilometres of farmland vanish every year. Such figures are alarming for a country that heavily depends on agriculture for food, employment and economic stability.

The case of Lahore clearly highlights this issue. In 1972, about 94 per cent of Lahore district's area was under cultivation. By 2010, this figure had dropped to just 29.5pc, and the situation has worsened since then. What was once rich farmland is now covered with concrete jungles. As cities grow outward, they tend to consume the food basket of Pakistan, particularly in the upper and lower Indus Basin, which has historically supported crop production.

Urbanisation is rising rapidly. Global reports suggest Pakistan is experiencing one of the highest rates of urbanisation in the region. More than half of the country's population now lives in cities. While urban growth is a sign of development, unplanned expansion creates more problems than benefits.

Other than the urban sprawl, salinity and waterlogging are also major issues, reducing soil fertility and crop yields. In addition, wind and water erosion are degrading large areas of the Indus Basin, weakening agricultural productivity.

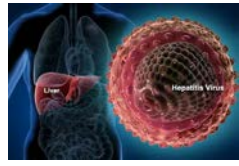
All these factors together are slowly damaging Pakistan's agriculture base. There is an urgent need for planned urban development, protection of agricultural land, and sustainable land management. Without timely action, the silent loss of land today may turn into a food crisis tomorrow.

Sanaullah Mirani
Dahark

Hepatitis B vaccine changes: Key facts for everyone

Lisa O'Mary

Hepatitis B vaccination is drawing renewed attention after a CDC advisory panel voted to no longer recommend the shot for all newborns. The call has drawn strong reaction from medical groups, who – citing recent shifts in the panel – are urging doctors and parents to rely on alternative guidance grounded in longstanding evidence.



The decision isn't just about newborns – it raises broader questions about protection across all ages and why adult immunity still matters for public health. Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by a viral infection that can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer. Infection within the first year of life nearly always leads to chronic infection, and 1 in 4 children with chronic hepatitis B will die from the disease. It can be transmitted at birth and have no symptoms for years while remaining highly contagious. When vaccination is given within 24 hours of birth, it's highly effective at preventing newborn infection.

While the birth dose is the focus right now, the discussion underscores a larger issue: Hepatitis B can affect anyone, and understanding who is protected is important for communities and individuals alike. Similar to the new COVID vaccination recommendations from the same panel, the new guidance is that parents should discuss the vaccine's risks and benefits with a doctor beforehand. The CDC expert panel – called the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, or ACIP – now says that if not given at birth, an initial dose should be given "no earlier" than 2 months of age. Numerous medical groups, including the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, immediately responded that they continue to recommend the first dose at birth for all babies.

Planting trees in the sea could act as a huge carbon sink

Sarah Wild

Planting trees along coastlines with human-made shore defenses, such as dikes, could protect more than 140,000 people from flooding and save up to \$800 million from flood damage globally each year, a new study finds. Places that have mangroves, such as parts of Florida, are better able to withstand the ravages of storms and their powerful waves. But although there is a push to restore mangroves around the world, there are several challenges.



In 2022, Hurricane Ian slammed into southwest Florida. Storm-powered waves reached up to 18 feet (5.5 meters) and devastated coastal communities and infrastructure. The hurricane killed 158 people and generated \$110 billion in damage in the state. Authorities say the storm surge, which is when the storm pushes water ashore, was the main cause of deaths. But places in Florida with mangroves saw 30% less damage than areas without mangroves, saving about \$13 billion. "Mangroves act as a sponge to incoming waves," Daniel Friess, an environmental scientist at Tulane University, told Live Science. "Their dense tangle of aboveground roots are great at soaking up incoming wave energy."

Mangroves are forests that exist in the intertidal zone between the ocean and land. Their trees can live in the salty water, and they are found in tropical and subtropical coastal zones. Climate change is expected to make hurricanes more frequent, and rising sea levels will drive higher storm surges. Mangroves protect communities and infrastructure from these surges.

Thinking about 'microdosing' a weight loss drug? Read this

Debbie Koenig

TV host Andy Cohen spent the summer doing it. Actor Rebel Wilson's making ads about it. Sports Illustrated swimsuit model Brooks Nader says she's "addicted" to it.



The "it" in all three instances: "microdosing" a GLP-1 weight loss medication. This concept – using very small amounts of the popular and pricey drugs, less than the FDA-approved minimums – seems to be everywhere, suddenly. Countless telehealth platforms have begun to offer it, with varying angles. One such company, Found, ran a full-page ad in The New York Times that said, "Microdosing GLP-1s isn't cosmetic. It's clinical." Their website promises help with food cravings as well as improved mental clarity, sleep, heart and blood sugar health, and hormonal balance. "Our program is clinically defined for patients with early metabolic dysfunction where lower doses may be most effective for prevention of progression to overt disease," Found Senior Medical Advisor Rekha Kumar, MD, said in a statement. "This is medical intervention for documented metabolic risk – not cosmetic weight loss for otherwise healthy individuals." Seeing microdosing everywhere might make you think that a lot of research proves this method works. But it's just the opposite. As promising as it appears, especially for certain health conditions, nearly all the evidence is anecdotal at this point – based more on personal experience than science. Kumar's statement went on to acknowledge the unofficial nature of the approach: "Clinicians routinely apply established research through clinical judgment. That's what we're doing here, with appropriate evaluation and monitoring."

Chinese EV maker claims it's engineered the world's first EV battery with huge 620-mile range

Alan Bradley

Researchers in China have tested a next-generation solid-state battery capable of pushing electric vehicles far beyond current range limits: potentially more than 620 miles (1,000 kilometers)



per charge, and even farther in future versions. Scientists at Nankai University, Tianjin, developed a high-energy, solid-state battery system that they claim has already been installed in a real vehicle and tested for long-distance driving, institution representatives said in a statement. The technology packs an energy density exceeding 500 watt-hours per kilogram — an increase of 30% over current leading lithium-ion batteries at 300 Wh/kg — according to the statement. Higher-density batteries mean more energy (and range) for less weight, and in a smaller form factor. While details about the specific car the battery was tested in are scant, subsequent reporting indicates it was a prototype developed by China FAW Group's battery manufacturing subsidiary, China Automotive New Energy Battery (CANEB). Solid-state batteries improve on their traditional counterparts in several ways, including safety, the scientists said. The liquid electrolytes in lithium-ion batteries are flammable, while solid electrolytes are non-flammable and less prone to catastrophic failure. Solid electrolytes may also provide a longer lifespan due to a reduction in dendrite growth — metal spikes that cause short circuits — as well as degradation from liquid chemistry.

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