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About Us

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

Founding Editor
Dr Niloufer Mahdi
Sub-Editor
Rizwan Ahmad
Communication Manager
Usman Riaz
Webmaster
Imran Shoukat

Editorial Office:
Treet Corporation Limited
2-H, Gulberg-II, Lahore
Phone +92-42-35817141-47,
Fax: +92-42-35817138
weeklycuttingedge@gmail.com
editor@weeklycuttingedge.com
info@weeklycuttingedge.com
Printed by Creative Vorks,
Plot# 203, Green Light Street,
Mughal Park, Bund Road, Lahore.

For subscription, please contact
info@weeklycutting.com

Cushioning the economic impact of US-Iran war

Farhan Khan

The adverse economic impact of the ongoing war in the Middle East has begun to be felt across the world, and Pakistan is no exception. The effects are already visible in the form of rising prices of petrol and other essential items of daily use, placing additional pressure on consumers and businesses alike.

A sharp surge in domestic energy prices became inevitable after the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran, which was followed by Tehran's response through attacks on US bases in Gulf states and disruptions to maritime activity around the Strait of Hormuz — a strategic passageway that carries nearly one-fifth of global oil supplies.

In these circumstances, the government had little choice but to introduce one of the steepest increases in petrol and high-speed diesel (HSD) prices in recent memory, raising both by Rs55 per litre. As a result, the ex-depot price of petrol jumped from Rs266.17 to Rs321.17 per litre, while the price of HSD increased from Rs280.86 to Rs335.86 per litre.

The rise in fuel prices has had an immediate effect on transportation and logistics across the country. Transport fares have increased by about 20 percent nationwide, affecting goods carriers, intercity buses, railways and airlines alike. Higher freight charges have also pushed up the prices of food items and other essential commodities while simultaneously increasing production costs for the industrial sector.

With international oil prices continuing to move upward, further adjustments in domestic energy prices cannot be ruled out in the coming weeks.

Economists also fear another major economic consequence of the Middle East conflict in the form of a potential decline in remittance inflows. Pakistan had recorded an 11.3 percent increase in remittances during July–February 2026 compared with the same period the previous year. However, any slowdown in remittances from Gulf countries — which account for roughly 50 to 51 percent of total inflows — could reduce foreign exchange reserves and increase Pakistan's reliance on external borrowing.

This suggests that the negative fallout of the Middle East conflict on Pakistan's economy could be substantial and may intensify if the conflict continues for a prolonged period.

Since petroleum and petroleum products make up a significant portion of Pakistan's imports, the country's trade deficit is also expected to widen further if the war persists. The situation has become more worrying as some major oil suppliers have reportedly halted shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, which has been closed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Another challenge facing Pakistan is the delayed release of the next tranche under the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) ongoing USD 7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) programme. According to media reports, the third mandatory review of the programme has been delayed because of the Middle East conflict, as global and country-specific macroeconomic projections prepared by the IMF now require reassessment.

In a press release issued shortly after the conflict began, the IMF stated that it had



observed disruptions to trade and economic activity, sharp increases in energy prices and volatility in global financial markets. These developments have been reflected globally and have also affected Pakistan, where exporters have begun urging the government to provide support to ensure that their shipments reach international markets without disruption.

The IMF team also issued a statement following virtual discussions with Pakistani authorities held from February 25 to March 11, noting that while considerable progress had been made in negotiations, discussions would continue in the coming days to fully assess the impact of recent global developments on Pakistan's economy and the EFF-supported programme.

The IMF acknowledged progress in several areas of programme implementation, including efforts to sustain fiscal consolidation to strengthen public finances, maintain a suffi-

ciently tight monetary policy to keep inflation within the State Bank of Pakistan's target range, and advance reforms aimed at improving the financial viability of the energy sector.

The statement also noted that particular attention had been given to deepening structural reforms, as the government has emphasized accelerating economic growth while simultaneously strengthening social protection and rebuilding spending on health and education.

The third review of the IMF programme requires several key policy measures, including easing monetary policy through reductions in the policy rate, strict adherence to the principle of full-cost recovery by utility companies and maintaining tight fiscal discipline.

There is growing concern in Pakistan that a failure to reach a staff-level agreement with the IMF, leading to a delay in the release of the next tranche, could create serious balance-of-payments challenges.

Even before the current conflict began, Pakistan's trade deficit had already widened significantly during the first eight months of the current fiscal year — rising from USD 20.04 billion in July–February 2025 to USD 25.04 billion during the same period this year.

At the same time, remittances are expected to remain under pressure until the end of the conflict, while there is little likelihood that the foreign direct investment pledged

by Gulf countries will materialise in the near term. Given the vulnerability of Pakistan's economy to fluctuations in international oil prices, economists believe that urgent steps must be taken to reduce the country's reliance on foreign borrowing.

The federal budget for the current year has earmarked nearly USD 20 billion in external financing, while a large portion of Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves remains debt-based, including approximately USD 12 billion in annual rollovers from three friendly countries.

In this context, experts stress the need for a renewed national effort to reduce dependence on foreign loans. Such a strategy would require significant fiscal discipline and belt-tightening measures, including a drastic reduction in current government expenditure, which has expanded considerably in recent years.

Action, not slogans, needed to tackle the education crisis

Nasim Ahmed

The government has launched a new initiative called the “No Child Left Behind” campaign to bring all out-of-school children into classrooms within the next three years. Last week, Federal Minister for Education Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui officially announced the launch of the campaign, declaring that the government will not allow a single child to fall through the cracks of the education system.

The minister said the initiative represents a countrywide push to bring every out-of-school child into the classroom and ensure that the right to education becomes a reality for all. He explained that a comprehensive review of schools across the country — from their numbers and geographical distribution to their physical condition and available facilities — would be carried out to identify gaps and address the structural challenges that prevent children from enrolling in school.

“Where brick-and-mortar schools are lacking, classes will be arranged in mosques or even private homes, if necessary,” he said, emphasising the government’s determination to remove every possible barrier to education. Siddiqui also pledged to achieve 100 percent school enrolment in Islamabad and its surrounding areas, calling it a test case that could later be replicated across the country as part of broader education reforms.

According to the minister, implementing Article 25-A of the Constitution, which guarantees free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of five and sixteen, is not merely a policy choice but a binding constitutional responsibility. He said that in order to tackle the growing crisis of out-of-school children, the government has finalised a comprehensive “Federal Action Plan 2025–30.”

Under this plan, teams will conduct door-to-door surveys to identify and map children who are not enrolled in schools. The data collected will help authorities understand the scale of the problem and the reasons behind it. In addition, schools will introduce second shifts to accommodate more students, while alternative pathways and accelerated learning programmes will be introduced to help older children catch up academically and eventually reintegrate into the formal education system.

The minister also announced the roll-out of digital dashboards designed to track enrolment and attendance in real time. These tools, he said, will improve transparency and accountability in the education system and ensure that factors such as poverty, distance or

administrative inefficiencies no longer stand in the way of a child’s right to schooling.

Pakistan currently holds the unenviable distinction of having the world’s second-highest number of out-of-school children. Estimates suggest that between 25 and 26 million boys and girls aged 5–16 are not attending any form of education. This staggering figure represents roughly 35 to 38 percent of the entire school-age population, placing the country in what many analysts describe as a deepening national education emergency.

According to the latest data from UNICEF Pakistan, the distribution of out-

persistent social and cultural barriers that continue to limit educational opportunities for girls in many parts of the country.

The crisis has been further aggravated by a historic decline in public investment in education. Government spending on education has dropped to just 0.8 percent of GDP in the 2024–25 fiscal year, the lowest level recorded in years and far below the 4–6 percent of GDP recommended by UNESCO for developing countries. At present, nearly 94 percent of provincial education budgets are spent on salaries, leaving very limited resources for building new classrooms, improving infrastructure, training



of-school children varies significantly across provinces. Punjab accounts for the largest absolute number, with 9.7 million children — about 27 percent of its school-age population — not attending school. Sindh follows with 7.4 million children, representing 44 percent of its age group. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, approximately 4.5 million children, or 34 percent, remain out of school. The situation is even more alarming in Balochistan, where nearly 69 percent of children, or about 3.5 million, are excluded from formal education.

Girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis. More than 55 percent of out-of-school children are female, with national figures showing that 42 percent of girls are not enrolled in school compared with 35 percent of boys. This gender disparity highlights the

teachers or maintaining existing facilities.

Learning outcomes have also deteriorated significantly. Studies indicate that 77 percent of ten-year-old children in Pakistan cannot read or understand a simple sentence, reflecting the severe quality challenges within the education system even for those who are enrolled in school.

A range of factors contributes to this crisis, including poverty, gender bias, weak infrastructure and systemic governance problems. Poverty remains the single largest barrier. Families struggling with rising inflation and food insecurity often pull their children out of school and push them into child labour, street vending or domestic work to supplement household income.

Cultural norms and safety concerns also

keep millions of girls at home, particularly in rural and remote areas where schools often lack basic facilities such as boundary walls, toilets or female teachers. Long distances to schools, poor transportation options, inadequate classrooms and teacher absenteeism further compound the problem and discourage parents from sending their children to school.

Recognising the urgency of the situation, the federal government and all provincial administrations unanimously approved the National Education Emergency Action Plan for Out-of-School Children during the 38th Inter-Provincial Education Ministers Conference held in January 2026. The plan sets ambitious targets for provinces to enrol all 25 million-plus out-of-school children over the next five years.

As part of the initiative, the federal government has also introduced a new “Challenge Fund” designed to support provinces that demonstrate progress in expanding access to education and enrolling out-of-school children. Launching the “No Child Left Behind” campaign, the federal education minister emphasised the government’s commitment, stating: “We are taking the school to the child. This is

not just a policy — it is a promise to protect their future.”

Additional momentum is also coming from international development partners. The World Bank has launched a new education project in Punjab that is expected to benefit more than four million children, including 80,000 who are currently out of school. Meanwhile, the Islamic Solidarity Fund for Development has pledged \$10 million to support education initiatives in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, further strengthening efforts to expand access to schooling.

Education experts and policymakers believe that reversing the crisis will require a comprehensive and sustained approach. Several successful pilot programmes have already highlighted a clear roadmap for reform. These include increasing education spending to at least four percent of GDP, introducing targeted stipends and conditional cash transfers for girls and poor families, recruiting and training large numbers of teachers — especially female teachers in rural areas — and expanding non-formal education and alternative learning pathways such as community schools and technology-based learning platforms.

Strict enforcement of Article 25-A through regular household surveys and stronger local accountability mechanisms will also be essential to ensure that every child is identified and brought into the education system.

Every year that 26 million children remain out of school costs Pakistan billions of dollars in lost productivity and economic potential. More importantly, it perpetuates cycles of poverty, inequality and social instability. The children working today in brick kilns, herding livestock or caring for younger siblings risk becoming adults who lack basic literacy and skills, limiting their ability to compete in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy.

The National Education Emergency Action Plan and the “No Child Left Behind” campaign therefore represent an important moment of political consensus and renewed commitment to education. If federal and provincial governments now translate these commitments into concrete actions — by increasing funding, hiring teachers, building safe and accessible schools and tracking every child — Pakistan may finally be able to turn one of its most persistent challenges into a powerful success story.

Questions persist over monetary strategy

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan’s central bank has opted to keep the policy rate unchanged despite rising global uncertainties, particularly the economic fallout from the escalating conflict in the Middle East. The decision, taken by the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), has sparked debate among economists and analysts who question whether the move adequately reflects the growing risks to the country’s inflation outlook and economic stability.

The MPC decided to maintain the policy rate at 10.5 percent in its latest meeting. In its Monetary Policy Statement (MPS), the committee acknowledged that the macroeconomic outlook had become “quite uncertain” following the outbreak of the Middle East conflict. According to the central bank, the scale and duration of the war would be key factors determining its impact on Pakistan’s economy.

However, some observers argue that describing the situation as uncertain understates the seriousness of the potential economic consequences. Several major fuel supply compa-

nies in the Gulf region — including firms from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar — have already invoked force majeure clauses in their contracts. Such clauses allow companies to suspend contractual obligations in the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond their control. These countries are among Pakistan’s primary suppliers of petroleum products, meaning any disruption in supply chains could quickly affect domestic energy availability and prices.

The geopolitical crisis has also had immediate repercussions in global financial markets. Bond yields have risen sharply, reflecting increased risk perceptions among investors. At the same time, global markets anticipate a significant rise in inflation due to surging energy prices.

Before the conflict began, international crude oil prices were hovering in the mid-60-dollar-per-barrel range. Since the start of hostilities, prices have surged to above 100 dollars per barrel and continue to trend upward. The spike in energy prices has already prompted downward revisions in economic forecasts across Western economies, while futures mar-

kets suggest that interest rates may increase globally in response to renewed inflationary pressures.

Against this backdrop, the SBP’s decision to keep the policy rate unchanged has drawn scrutiny, particularly regarding the reasoning presented in the Monetary Policy Statement.

The first point of contention relates to inflation trends. Headline inflation rose from 5.8 percent in January to 7 percent in February, representing an increase of 1.2 percentage points in just one month. Critics point out that this increase contrasts with the central bank’s earlier decision to reduce the policy rate by 50 basis points in December 2025, when inflation had declined by only half a percentage point — from 6.1 percent in November to 5.6 percent in December.

The rise in energy prices could further intensify inflationary pressures, especially after a sharp increase in domestic fuel prices. Petrol and diesel prices were recently raised by Rs55 per litre, a move that is likely to push transportation costs and overall living expenses higher. Such developments could worsen poverty levels in the country. The World Bank estimat-

ed last year that 44.7 percent of Pakistan's population — approximately 107.95 million people — was already living below the poverty line.

The central bank also stated in its policy statement that core inflation had increased to around 7.6 percent. However, the source of this figure was not clearly specified. According to data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), core inflation in urban areas stood at 7.2 percent in January and declined slightly to 7.1 percent in February, while rural core inflation remained unchanged at 8.3 percent during the same period.

Another point raised by analysts concerns the external sector. While the SBP highlighted a current account surplus recorded in January 2026, critics note that the broader trend remains negative. During the July–January period of the current fiscal year, Pakistan

to business groups, around 150 factories have closed in recent months due to rising production costs and weak demand. In addition, several multinational companies have reportedly exited the Pakistani market. Manufacturers have repeatedly called for reductions in input costs — including electricity tariffs, taxes and borrowing costs — to improve competitiveness with regional economies.

Another claim in the policy statement that has drawn criticism relates to consumer sentiment. The SBP stated that consumers' inflation expectations and confidence had improved in February, while business expectations remained broadly stable. Critics argue that this assessment appears inconsistent with the acknowledged rise in inflation and the broader economic uncertainty triggered by global developments.

review of Pakistan's ongoing programme, the Fund stated that monetary policy should remain sufficiently restrictive to ensure that inflation remains anchored within the SBP's target range.

If the conflict in the Middle East persists and global energy prices remain elevated, Pakistan could face renewed inflationary pressures. Under such circumstances, economists warn that the central bank may ultimately be forced to raise the policy rate significantly — possibly by 150 to 300 basis points.

The IMF has also urged Pakistan to strengthen the functioning of its foreign exchange market. Specifically, the Fund has called on the SBP to deepen the interbank foreign exchange market and allow the exchange rate to act as the primary shock absorber in times of economic stress. However, progress on



recorded a current account deficit of approximately \$1.1 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit widened significantly, reaching \$20.5 billion in the first half of the fiscal year compared with \$15.9 billion during the same period the previous year.

In response to the widening deficit, the central bank reportedly intervened in the foreign exchange market by purchasing dollars from the interbank market to strengthen its foreign exchange reserves.

The manufacturing sector's performance also raises questions about the monetary policy stance. The Monetary Policy Statement cited large-scale manufacturing (LSM) growth of 0.4 percent year-on-year by December 2025, with cumulative growth estimated at 4.8 percent during the first half of the fiscal year.

However, industry representatives dispute the strength of this recovery. According

Fiscal performance is another area of concern. Tax revenues during the July–February period increased by 10.6 percent compared with the previous year. While this represents growth in collections, the increase remains below official targets, suggesting that revenue projections agreed between the government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) may have been overly optimistic.

Some analysts believe that the decision to keep the policy rate unchanged reflects pressure from the government to support economic growth. Lower interest rates can encourage private sector borrowing, which in turn can stimulate investment and industrial activity. However, such considerations must be balanced against the need to maintain price stability.

The IMF has repeatedly emphasised the importance of maintaining a tight and data-driven monetary policy. In its second

these reforms has been gradual.

The broader challenge facing Pakistan's economic management lies in balancing external obligations, domestic inflation pressures and growth requirements. Since 2019, successive governments have struggled to implement structural reforms needed to strengthen fiscal and economic resilience. At the same time, the IMF has maintained strict conditions for financial support, limiting the government's policy flexibility.

As Pakistan navigates an increasingly volatile global environment, the effectiveness of its monetary policy will play a crucial role in maintaining macroeconomic stability. Decisions taken by the central bank in the coming months will likely determine whether the country can manage rising external pressures while sustaining economic recovery and protecting vulnerable segments of the population.

Rising fiscal challenges

Muhammad Zain

Growing concerns over Pakistan's rising external debt and inefficiencies in development spending have prompted calls for greater fiscal discipline and tighter oversight of foreign-funded projects.

The Senate Standing Committee on Economic Affairs recently cautioned the Economic Affairs Division (EAD) that inflated project costs, over-invoicing, weak planning and implementation delays were draining billions of rupees from the national treasury. It advised the division to exercise restraint in contracting new external loans and to address structural weaknesses in project management.

The warning reflects mounting anxiety among policymakers over Pakistan's reliance on external financing to sustain development spending and manage fiscal pressures. While foreign loans have long played a critical role in funding infrastructure projects and supporting economic reforms, critics argue that inefficiencies in project execution often undermine their intended benefits, leaving the country with higher debt obligations but limited economic returns.

Members of the Senate committee noted that poor project planning and inadequate monitoring frequently lead to inflated costs. Over-invoicing and procurement irregularities further add to the financial burden, making projects far more expensive than originally estimated. Such inefficiencies, they argued, ultimately place a heavy strain on public finances at a time when the government is already struggling with limited fiscal space.

Delays in project implementation are another persistent challenge. Development projects in Pakistan often face prolonged timelines due to bureaucratic bottlenecks, weak coordination between federal and provincial authorities, and difficulties in releasing counterpart funds required to complement foreign assistance. As projects stall, costs escalate due to rising construction expenses, currency depreciation and contractual adjustments.

Pakistan's narrow fiscal space has further complicated the situation. With the government grappling with high debt servicing costs and limited revenue collection, allocating adequate funds for development projects has become increasingly difficult. The shortage of counterpart funding frequently slows project execution, particularly those financed through external assistance, which require timely local contributions to ensure smooth implementation.

Recognising these constraints, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has in recent years pushed Pakistan to adopt stricter

spending priorities. Under the country's last three IMF programmes — beginning in 2019 and including the ongoing arrangement — the government has been urged to focus development spending on projects nearing completion rather than initiating new ones. The objective is to maximise economic returns from existing investments and avoid the accumulation of incomplete or delayed projects.

This approach has resulted in a significant gap between the government's budgeted development spending and the actual disbursement of funds. While the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) continues to allocate large amounts for development initiatives on paper, only a relatively small proportion is ultimately released during the fiscal year. Consequently, several foreign-funded projects have faced funding constraints, reducing their scope and delaying completion.

However, the concerns raised by the Senate committee extend beyond project-specific loans to broader programme and budget support financing. Pakistan has increasingly relied on such external assistance to bridge gaps in its balance of payments and to support fiscal stability.

Recent economic indicators highlight the challenges facing the country's external sector. Pakistan's trade deficit has widened again, largely reflecting the recurring boom-and-bust cycle that has historically characterised the economy. Economists attribute this pattern to inconsistent fiscal and monetary policies that periodically stimulate economic growth but also trigger surges in imports and external imbalances.

During the July–January period of fiscal year 2025–26, Pakistan's exports declined by 5.5 percent compared with the same period a year earlier, while imports rose by 9.8 percent. This divergence further widened the trade deficit, increasing pressure on the country's external accounts.

Despite a noticeable rise in workers' remittances during the same period — which have traditionally served as a financial cushion for the economy — the current account balance deteriorated. Instead of maintaining a surplus of \$564 million as recorded in the comparable period the previous year, the current account moved into deficit, reaching negative \$1.074 billion.

Energy imports remain one of the largest contributors to Pakistan's trade imbalance. Petroleum and petroleum products account for a significant share of the country's total import bill, making the economy highly vulnerable to fluctuations in international oil prices.

This vulnerability has become more pronounced in light of recent geopolitical tensions

in the Middle East. Global oil markets reacted sharply after the outbreak of hostilities in the region, with international oil prices reportedly rising by around 10 percent within just two days.

The situation has been further complicated by disruptions in shipping routes. Some traders have reportedly halted oil shipments through the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) issued radio warnings declaring the strait closed. Although some maritime traffic continues to flow through the passage, the uncertainty surrounding shipping routes has heightened concerns about potential supply disruptions.

Given Pakistan's heavy dependence on imported energy, any prolonged instability in oil markets could significantly increase the country's import bill and widen its trade deficit further. Higher fuel costs would also have a ripple effect across the domestic economy, pushing up transportation costs, increasing inflationary pressures and straining public finances.

Despite concerns, reducing reliance on external borrowing in the near term appears difficult. The current federal budget has already projected external financing requirements of nearly \$20 billion for the fiscal year. This figure reflects the country's continued dependence on foreign loans to finance its fiscal deficit and maintain adequate foreign exchange reserves.

Pakistan's reserves themselves are largely supported by external borrowing and financial assistance. In addition to multilateral loans, the country receives approximately \$12 billion annually in rollover support from three friendly countries. While these rollovers help stabilise the balance of payments in the short term, they also underscore the structural challenges facing the economy.

Ultimately, reducing Pakistan's reliance on external borrowing will require broader fiscal reforms and stronger economic management. Policymakers may need to pursue stricter budgetary discipline, improve revenue collection and curb unnecessary expenditures. In particular, controlling current expenditure — including administrative and operational spending — could create greater fiscal space for development priorities.

It is becoming increasingly clear that long-term economic stability will depend on prudent fiscal management, more efficient use of development funds and a gradual shift away from heavy dependence on foreign loans. Without such reforms, Pakistan risks remaining trapped in a cycle of borrowing to finance deficits, leaving the economy vulnerable to both domestic inefficiencies and external shocks.

Export disruptions signal fresh challenges

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's export sector has come under fresh pressure after the suspension of vessel operations to Middle Eastern destinations disrupted shipping schedules, leaving hundreds of export containers stranded at ports and creating uncertainty for exporters already coping with declining shipments and rising economic pressures.

Business leaders have warned that the sudden halt in vessel movements has severely disrupted export logistics and could result in substantial financial losses for exporters, many of whom had already transported their consignments to ports in line with scheduled departures.

The disruption in shipping operations has emerged at a time when Pakistan's export performance is already showing signs of weakness. Official data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) indicates that textile exports — the backbone of the country's export sector — declined to \$1.3 billion in February 2026.

This represented a year-on-year decrease of 7.2 percent and a sharp fall of 24.6 percent compared with January, when textile exports had reached \$1.738 billion. The decline was observed across several major categories within the textile sector. Knitwear exports dropped by 14.5 percent to \$312.5 million, while bedwear exports fell by 11.5 percent to \$220.9 million. Towel exports also registered a notable decline, decreasing by 16.37 percent to \$81.4 million. Similarly, cotton cloth exports slipped by 10.9 percent to \$132.5 million. Exports of readymade garments — one of Pakistan's higher-value textile products — also recorded a slight decline of 0.56 percent, reaching \$327.3 million compared with the same month last year. However, the textile sector was not entirely negative. Cotton yarn exports showed a significant increase of 43.6 percent, rising to \$73.84 million during the month. This growth provided some support to overall textile export earnings but was not sufficient to offset declines in other categories.

Pakistan's food export sector also experienced a downturn in February. Total food exports fell by 27.5 percent to \$405.9 million compared with the same month last year. Rice exports — a major contributor to agricultural export earnings — dropped sharply by 35.4 percent to \$186.7 million. Within this category, basmati rice exports declined by 19.2 percent to

\$71.4 million, while exports of other rice varieties plunged by 42.5 percent to \$115.3 million.

Vegetable exports recorded one of the steepest declines, falling by 75.7 percent to \$15.15 million. Fruit exports, however, showed marginal growth of 1.2 percent, reaching \$26.9 million. Some segments of the food sector performed better. Exports of oilseeds, nuts and kernels increased by 40.7 percent to \$25.95 million. Meat exports rose by 22.1 percent to \$53.9 million, while fish and fish product exports climbed by 12.9 percent to \$35.35 million compared with February of the previous year.

In other export sectors, sports goods exports increased by 6.6 percent to \$33.25 million, largely supported by a 9.4 percent rise in football shipments that reached \$20 million. Meanwhile, surgical instrument exports declined by 6.1 percent to \$34 million, though



cement exports posted an increase of 11.2 percent to \$22.2 million.

On the import side, Pakistan witnessed mixed trends across different sectors. Imports of the petroleum group declined by 21.25 percent year-on-year to \$982.8 million in February. Petroleum product imports dropped significantly by 39.3 percent to \$284 million, while liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports fell by 25.25 percent to \$189 million. Crude oil imports decreased by 4.55 percent to \$423 million, although imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) increased by 4.1 percent to \$86.7 million.

Machinery imports recorded a modest increase of 4.3 percent, reaching \$870.8 million. Within this category, imports of construction and mining machinery rose by 13.7 percent to \$13.6 million, while textile machinery imports increased slightly by 2.6 percent to \$46.4 million.

Imports of power generation machinery also rose by 8.7 percent to \$68.1 million. Telecom machinery imports registered strong

growth of 21.1 percent, reaching \$211.5 million, including mobile phone imports that increased by 17.95 percent to \$155.5 million. Agricultural machinery imports saw a sharp rise of 74.8 percent to \$14 million, while imports of electrical machinery and apparatus fell significantly by 40 percent to \$184 million.

Food group imports increased by 13.6 percent to \$908.1 million. Palm oil imports rose by 5.3 percent to \$385.6 million, while tea imports increased by 33.8 percent to \$61.4 million. However, imports of spices declined by 2.1 percent to \$22 million, and pulse imports dropped by 25.5 percent to \$71.4 million. Meanwhile, imports in the transport sector surged by 48.8 percent to \$299 million. Imports of completely built motor vehicles increased by 43 percent to \$36 million, while imports of CKD and SKD vehicle kits rose by 68.5 percent to \$157 million.

Beyond trade figures, Pakistan's broader economic outlook is facing additional pressures. The country is preparing to make large external payments, including a significant oil import bill and more than \$1 billion in Eurobond repayments due in April.

Despite these obligations, authorities expect the payments to be made on time without major disruption to the exchange rate, supported by steady foreign currency inflows, particularly workers' remittances during the Ramadan period.

Under the ongoing \$7 billion programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pakistan has been managing imports within the limits of available foreign exchange generated through exports and remittances.

However, economists warn that several risks remain on the horizon. Rising fuel prices, tighter global financial conditions, and potential slowdowns in remittance inflows from Gulf countries could all place additional pressure on Pakistan's fragile economic recovery.

In the coming months, the country's economic stability will depend largely on maintaining export momentum, managing imports prudently, and sustaining remittance inflows. Policymakers will also need to maintain investor confidence and secure external financing to navigate a challenging global economic environment. In this context, resolving the current export shipping disruption and providing timely support to exporters will be crucial to safeguarding Pakistan's trade sector and protecting the broader economy from further shocks.

The cycle of violence and the urgent need for transformative leadership

Raza Khan

The growing presence of violence in Pakistan's social and political landscape has become difficult to ignore. From domestic disputes to communal conflicts and political tensions, the use of force increasingly appears as a routine means of settling disagreements. Understanding why violence has become so deeply embedded in everyday life is complex, but one significant factor lies in the nature of the country's social structure. Much of Pakistani society still operates within authoritarian, patriarchal and tribal frameworks where power is often exercised through dominance rather than dialogue. In such an environment, conflict and coercion frequently become the default tools for resolving disputes.

Societies that lack strong democratic values rarely cultivate peace as a shared aspiration. Instead, the capacity to compel opponents into submission is often admired and accepted as a legitimate strategy. When social norms place authority above equality and obedience above dialogue, peaceful conflict resolution becomes secondary. As a result, institutions and practices that rely on pressure, intimidation or even violence gain legitimacy, reinforcing a culture where disagreements are settled through force rather than compromise.

In many parts of Pakistan where violence appears absent, what exists is often not genuine peace but rather what scholars describe as "negative peace." This form of peace refers merely to the absence of open hostilities rather than the presence of harmony or justice. In such situations, individuals or groups refrain from aggression not because conflicts have been resolved, but because they fear retaliation. An uneasy equilibrium develops in which rival parties avoid confrontation simply because they know violence would trigger an equally violent response. This fragile balance resembles what international relations theorists once called the "balance of terror" during the Cold War, when nuclear deterrence prevented direct conflict between powerful nations. Rival states such as the United States and the Soviet Union refrained from war because the consequences would have been catastrophic for both sides. Similarly, regional adversaries like Pakistan and India maintain a tense but largely stable peace because of the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons.

However, while such a balance may work at the level of international politics, it rarely produces stability within society. In domestic contexts, fear-based peace remains brittle and unpredictable. In Pakistan's socially fragmented

and conflict-prone environment, the balance of terror merely suppresses tensions without resolving them. Beneath the surface, resentment, inequality and mistrust continue to simmer. When the fragile balance eventually breaks, the resulting conflicts can become even more intense and destructive.

A sustainable and healthier alternative lies in the concept of "positive peace." Unlike negative peace, which focuses only on preventing violence, positive peace seeks to eliminate the root causes that generate conflict in the first place. It requires the creation of fair political systems, inclusive economic opportunities and social structures based on justice and equality. Only when citizens feel respected, represented and economically secure can a society genuinely move beyond cycles of violence.

Achieving positive peace demands more than temporary policy measures. It requires a society that is politically aware, socially conscious and committed to democratic principles. Citizens must be educated, informed and actively engaged in shaping their collective future. Such conditions, however, cannot emerge overnight. Transforming a society into one that values dialogue, participation and accountability is a gradual process that requires consistent effort over many years.

In this transformation, leadership plays a crucial role. The direction in which a society evolves often depends on the clarity of vision and the priorities set by those in positions of authority. Effective leaders must recognize the roots of violence and address them through thoughtful policies and institutional reforms. If the political leadership demonstrates determination and coherence in its approach, the journey toward positive peace becomes far more achievable.

True leadership is not merely about holding office or exercising authority. It involves the intellectual capacity and moral courage to understand the complexities of conflict and to confront them honestly. Genuine leaders analyze the causes of violence, assess its long-term consequences and develop strategies aimed at lasting solutions rather than temporary control.

Historically, transformative leadership tends to emerge through two primary paths. The first occurs when society collectively realizes that existing conditions have become unbearable and that current leaders are incapable of addressing the crisis. This awareness often leads to a search for alternatives. Citizens begin to identify individuals or movements capable of offering new ideas and directions. Over time, such figures gain public trust and become recognized as credible agents of change.

The second pathway is less dependent on public demand. Sometimes, visionary individuals recognize the severity of a crisis even when society itself has not fully grasped it. These individuals step forward without waiting for public pressure or endorsement. Motivated by a sense of responsibility, they take the initiative to guide society toward reform and stability.

Pakistan today appears to occupy an uncertain position between these two scenarios. Many citizens are aware that violence has permeated various aspects of life and that existing leadership structures often struggle to provide solutions. Yet this awareness has not evolved into a widespread, organized effort to seek new leadership or demand structural change. The recognition of the problem remains largely individual rather than collective.

As a result, violence continues to spread across different spheres of society. It manifests in domestic environments, community disputes and national political discourse. Although a few individuals and groups have attempted to challenge this pattern, their efforts have so far remained fragmented and insufficient to mobilize society on a broader scale.

Another significant obstacle lies in the traditional structure of leadership in Pakistan. Historically, authority in many regions has been concentrated in the hands of influential families and local elites such as feudal landlords and tribal chiefs. These figures often derive their power from inherited status rather than merit, democratic processes or institutional accountability. Their leadership styles frequently reflect conservative outlooks and narrow interests.

Because of this, such leaders have often focused on managing conflicts temporarily rather than addressing their underlying causes. While they may use negotiation, patronage or coercion to maintain order within their domains, these approaches rarely produce lasting solutions. Consequently, disputes persist and sometimes intensify over time, contributing to broader patterns of violence.

Modern Pakistan, however, is rapidly changing. Population growth, expanding access to education and the widespread use of digital communication have transformed social dynamics. Citizens are increasingly exposed to diverse ideas and global perspectives. These changes demand a different kind of leadership—one capable of understanding complex social realities and responding with innovative policies.

Traditional leaders, relying on outdated methods and hierarchical authority, often find themselves ill-prepared for these new challenges. Issues such as social inequality, youth unrest

and political polarization require sophisticated analysis and inclusive solutions rather than rigid control.

What Pakistan urgently needs is a new generation of leaders who possess both intellectual depth and practical vision. Such leaders

must be well educated, informed by research and aware of the historical factors that shape contemporary conflicts. Exposure to diverse cultures and ideas can also help them develop broader perspectives on governance and social harmony. Most importantly, they must have the

determination to promote democratic values, strengthen institutions and address structural inequalities that fuel unrest. Only through such leadership can Pakistan gradually move away from a culture of coercion toward a society grounded in justice, dialogue and genuine peace.

AI training reshapes teaching in Pakistan

Rasheed Ali

On a quiet morning at Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad, a classroom full of teachers sat facing their laptops instead of chalkboards. Some leaned forward with curiosity, others with hesitation. On the screen in front of them were words that until recently belonged more to technology labs than lecture halls: artificial intelligence, AI tools, digital assistants.

For decades, the tools of teaching in Pakistan rarely changed — chalk, textbooks and handwritten lesson plans. But now a new chapter is quietly unfolding.

The university has launched a three-day faculty training programme titled “Empowering Educators: Integrating AI into Teaching Practices,” an initiative designed to introduce educators to artificial intelligence and explore how it can reshape the way knowledge is delivered in classrooms.

The workshop is being organised by the Directorate of Academic Planning and Course Production in collaboration with the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, a regional organisation that promotes the use of technology in education across Asia.

At the inaugural session, Dean of the Faculty of Education, Prof Dr Fazlur Rehman, addressed the gathering of teachers who had come to learn something that, until recently, many associated with science fiction. Artificial intelligence, he said, is no longer a distant possibility. It is already influencing the way students learn, search for information and interact with knowledge.

Joining the session online, CEMCA Director Dr Basheer Hamad reminded participants that technology, like any tool, carries both promise and risk. Artificial intelligence, he noted, can be misused, but when applied responsibly it can dramatically improve the learning process. Tasks that once required hours of preparation — drafting lesson plans, designing quizzes or preparing classroom activities

— can now be completed within minutes with the help of AI.

For many teachers in the room, the idea was both exciting and slightly unsettling. Teaching has always been deeply human, built on personal interaction, instinct and experience. Now, algorithms are beginning to share space in that process.

Yet the mood of the workshop suggested curiosity rather than resistance. Over the course of three days, national and international experts are guiding participants through demonstrations of AI tools, discussing ethical use of technology and answering questions about how these systems might fit into everyday teaching.

Director Academic Planning and Course Production Dr Zahid Majeed explained that the aim of the workshop is not to replace traditional teaching but to strengthen it. AI, he said, should be viewed as an assistant that helps educators save time and enhance creativity.

While the initiative at the Islamabad university represents a small but meaningful step, it is part of a broader movement slowly taking shape across Pakistan’s education sector.

Hundreds of kilometres away in Karachi, the Government of Sindh has launched what officials describe as the country’s first AI-based online training programme for schoolteachers. The six-month pilot project aims to train around 3,500 educators from the districts of Dadu, Tando Allahyar, Tharparkar and Umerkot — areas where access to modern educational resources has often been limited.

The programme is being implemented by the School Education and Literacy Department with financial support from UNICEF and technical assistance from Khan Academy Pakistan.

At the centre of the training is an AI assistant known as Khanmigo, a digital tool designed to help teachers plan lessons, generate questions and suggest interactive activities for classrooms. Instead of spending long evenings preparing teaching material, educators can use the AI system to quickly design learning exercises tailored to specific topics.

Officials involved in the programme believe the technology could transform classrooms in remote districts where teachers often struggle with limited resources and heavy workloads. Sindh Education Minister Sardar Ali Shah described the initiative as an investment in the future of the province’s students. If teachers become comfortable with modern tools, he said, students in rural schools will be able to access education that matches global standards.

For many education experts, the logic behind such programmes is simple. Technology in classrooms will continue to expand, whether teachers are prepared for it or not. Training educators to understand and guide these tools is therefore essential.

Across the world, artificial intelligence is already being used to personalise learning, identify students who need extra support and create more engaging classroom experiences. In Pakistan, however, the transition is still at an early stage, shaped by challenges such as limited internet access, lack of devices and varying levels of digital literacy among teachers.

But change often begins with small steps — a workshop here, a pilot programme there.

Back in Islamabad, as the training session at Allama Iqbal Open University continues, teachers are experimenting with AI tools for the first time. Some are discovering how an algorithm can draft a lesson plan within seconds. Others are exploring how AI can suggest creative classroom activities or generate quizzes based on textbook chapters.

The room occasionally fills with laughter when the technology produces unexpected results. At other moments, it sparks thoughtful debate about how much responsibility should be given to machines in shaping education. For now, the chalkboard has not disappeared. But sitting beside it, quietly gaining attention, is a new kind of assistant — one made not of chalk or paper, but of code. And for Pakistan’s teachers, learning how to work alongside that assistant may soon become one of the most important lessons of all.

America's war on Iran and the lessons of history

Faheem Amir

Every rise is followed by a fall, and every empire is destined to decline. History demonstrates that great powers often commit fatal errors that hasten their downfall.

Historian Edward Gibbon, in his study of the Roman Empire, revealed how internal decay and strategic miscalculations led to its collapse. Likewise, Arnold J. Toynbee argued that civilizations decline when their leaders fail to respond wisely to historical challenges. Will Durant also observed that power shifts between civilizations when moral strength and wisdom erode. It appears that history is repeating itself. Intoxicated by power, the United States has launched another unlawful war—this time against Iran—one that may deal a severe blow to its economic vitality, military capability, and strategic influence.

The Iran war has now entered its third week. America and Israel are deploying every lethal weapon short of nuclear arms to demolish Iranian military installations and civilian infrastructure. So far, their attacks have killed hundreds of innocent people, including Ayatollah Khamenei and around 160 schoolgirls. Despite their technological superiority and overwhelming air power, they have failed to achieve their declared goal of regime change. Instead, Khamenei's assassination has strengthened Iran's national unity. The appointment of his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, as the new Supreme Leader signals Iran's determination to pursue its policies with resolve and courage rather than retreat in the face of an unlawful war.

In his first public address, Mojtaba Khamenei firmly vowed that Iran would continue to fight. He declared that the Strait of Hormuz could remain closed and warned that all U.S. bases in the region must be shut down immediately or face attack. While reaffirming Iran's commitment to friendly relations with its neighbors, he asserted that strikes on U.S. bases in the region would continue.

Iran's ongoing attacks on American bases in Gulf countries and on Israel have already shaken the long-standing perception of the invincibility of the U.S. defense system. With each passing day, the conflict inflicts greater economic and strategic damage on America's global reputation.

As the war escalates, Donald Trump and

Benjamin Netanyahu have begun exploiting religious sentiments to garner domestic support. A widely circulated video shows evangelical pastors praying for Trump and for victory in the conflict at the Oval Office. Netanyahu has also invoked religious and biblical narratives to frame the war in moral and historical terms, seeking to mobilize popular backing.

In truth, America and Israel are defying morality and international law by attacking innocent civilians in Iran. French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the strikes as being “outside the framework of international law.” Spain denounced them as “unilateral military action” and denied U.S. access to its bases. Within the United States, Senator



Bernie Sanders labeled the war “illegal,” while Senators Chris Van Hollen and Chris Murphy warned it undermines American security and strategic interests.

Trump and Netanyahu stand accused as war criminals who should face trial for initiating unlawful wars and atrocities against civilians in Iran and Gaza. Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown observed that “the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law, as well as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, unequivocally prohibit assaults on children and schools. Attacks on educational institutions are war crimes listed under Article 8 of the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). Leaders who order, authorize, or knowingly permit such assaults should face arrest and prosecution.”

Guardian columnist Simon Tisdall writes: “Nine days in, the conduct of the unjustified, illegal U.S.-Israel war against Iran grows ever more disproportionate, dishonourable, and deranged. The torpedoing of an Iranian navy ship off Sri Lanka by a U.S. submarine shows that for reckless Donald Trump, the

whole world is his battlefield. Diplomacy, sabotaged by Washington, has been replaced by relentless airstrikes that murder and maim hundreds of Iranian civilians. The Trump White House increasingly resembles a madhouse. War aims shift daily. A rambling, clueless president insists on helping select Iran's next ayatollah. Meanwhile, his ‘secretary for war,’ Pete Hegseth, rants about killing without mercy. Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu—already charged with war crimes in Gaza—and Trump must now face prosecution by the ICC for atrocities committed in Iran, especially the appalling February 28 bombing of a school in Minab.”

Many critics argue that Trump is fighting Israel's war. Some allege that Netanyahu has pressured him through the Epstein files. Economist Richard Wolff suggests that Trump may have started the war to distract Americans from the Epstein scandal and worsening domestic economic conditions. This desperate attempt to halt the decline of the American empire could, however, accelerate it instead.

Political theorist John J. Mearsheimer, author of *Why Leaders Lie*, contends that Donald Trump often acts in ways disconnected from strategic reality. “It's clear from listening to him that he has all sorts of pictures in his head that bear no resemblance to reality,” Mearsheimer states. “He repeatedly says things that are simply untrue—such as claiming that Iran's weapons are inaccurate, which is obviously false. Iran possesses highly precise ballistic missiles and drones. He even made the bizarre claim that Iran has Tomahawk missiles, which makes no sense. Trump further insisted that the United States ‘erased’ Iran's nuclear capability last year, though much of its 60-percent enriched uranium survived. His thinking is incoherent, and under such conditions, it's easy to see how someone like Netanyahu could deceive him into believing that a quick victory was possible.”

Mearsheimer has also warned that Israel, as a dangerously radical state, could resort to using atomic weapons to achieve its objectives. One thing, however, seems certain: Iran will not surrender. If the conflict continues to expand, it could engulf the entire region in flames, triggering a catastrophe with dire consequences for the global economy and international stability—unless the global community intervenes to stop it.

Ensuring safe workplaces for women remains a critical challenge

Dr. Fatima Khan

International Women's Day offers an opportunity not only to celebrate the achievements and resilience of women around the world but also to reflect on the continuing challenges that hinder their progress. In Pakistan, despite gradual improvements in legislation and awareness, women still face significant barriers in professional spaces.

A recent event organised by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research shed light on one of the most pressing concerns confronting working women today: the need for workplaces that are free from harassment, intimidation, and discrimination.

Participants at the event stressed that the struggle for women's rights is far from over. While women have made considerable strides in education, employment, and leadership roles, the conditions under which many of them work remain troubling. Harassment at the workplace continues to discourage women from pursuing career opportunities or advancing in their professions. The discussion highlighted that creating a respectful and secure working environment is essential for both gender equality and national development.

One of the major misconceptions surrounding workplace harassment is that it is limited to physical misconduct or explicit sexual advances. Experts at the gathering emphasised that harassment takes many forms and can often be more subtle. Verbal abuse, hostile attitudes, humiliating remarks, and discriminatory behaviour can also create an unhealthy work environment. These actions may not always attract immediate attention, but they gradually erode a person's confidence and sense of belonging.

For many women, harassment appears in the form of dismissive language, exclusion from decision-making processes, or constant questioning of their professional abilities. Such behaviour undermines their competence and restricts opportunities for growth. Over time, these experiences can negatively affect mental health, reduce productivity, and discourage women from remaining in the workforce. In a society where women already face cultural and structural challenges in pursuing careers, these additional pressures further limit their participation in economic life.

Pakistan has taken some important steps to address these concerns through legislation. The "Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010" was introduced as a landmark initiative aimed at safeguarding

women in professional environments. The law was later strengthened through amendments in 2022, expanding its scope and clarifying procedures for addressing complaints. The legislation requires both public and private organisations to establish three-member inquiry committees responsible for investigating harassment cases and ensuring accountability.

Another relevant legal provision is Section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which prescribes penalties such as fines and imprisonment for acts that insult the modesty of a woman. These legal protections are designed to send a clear message that harassment is unacceptable and punishable. However, speakers at the PILER event noted that the real issue lies not in the absence of laws but in their effective implementation.

In many workplaces, the mandatory inquiry committees either do not exist or function only on paper. Some organisations establish committees merely to fulfil legal requirements, without ensuring that they operate independent-



ly or fairly. As a result, victims often feel that filing complaints will not lead to meaningful action. The lack of transparency in some complaint procedures further weakens trust in the system.

Fear also plays a major role in discouraging women from reporting harassment. Many worry about retaliation, professional isolation, or damage to their reputations. In certain cases, victims fear that speaking out may lead to job loss or social stigma. This environment of silence allows harassment to persist unchecked, reinforcing a cycle where perpetrators feel protected by institutional inaction.

Participants at the event emphasised that stronger monitoring and accountability mechanisms are urgently needed. Organisations must be required to maintain fully functional inquiry committees, provide training on workplace ethics, and ensure that employees are aware of their rights. Complaint procedures should be transparent, confidential, and accessible so that victims feel safe coming forward.

Awareness campaigns also play a critical role in addressing the issue. Many workers,

particularly in smaller organisations or informal sectors, remain unaware of the protections available to them under the law. Educational programmes can help inform both employers and employees about appropriate workplace behaviour and the consequences of harassment. By promoting awareness, institutions can create a culture where respect and equality are considered fundamental professional values.

Another important theme highlighted during the discussion was that women's empowerment should not be treated as a concern affecting women alone. Instead, it must be recognised as a broader human rights and development issue. Societies thrive when all members are given equal opportunities to contribute and succeed. Limiting women's participation in the workforce not only harms individuals but also weakens economic and social progress.

Countries that promote inclusive workplaces often experience greater innovation, improved productivity, and stronger organisational performance. When women feel safe and respected in their professional roles, they are more likely to contribute their ideas and talents fully. On the other hand, environments characterised by harassment and discrimination create stress, conflict, and inefficiency, ultimately affecting institutional effectiveness.

Encouraging women to speak up against injustice is also an important step toward change. Support systems, including legal assistance and counselling services, can help victims navigate the complaint process. At the same time, men must also play a constructive role by promoting respectful behaviour and challenging discriminatory attitudes within their workplaces.

The message emerging from the PILER event was clear: achieving gender equality in the workplace requires collective commitment. Laws and policies provide the foundation, but genuine progress depends on consistent implementation, strong institutional accountability, and a shift in societal attitudes.

International Women's Day serves as a reminder that the struggle for equality continues. A just and progressive society cannot be built without guaranteeing women the right to work in conditions that uphold dignity, safety, and respect. Ensuring harassment-free workplaces is not merely a legal obligation but a moral and social responsibility.

Only when women can pursue their careers without fear of intimidation or discrimination will Pakistan be able to unlock the full potential of its workforce and move confidently toward a more equitable and prosperous future.

The case against automated unveiling

I am a scholar and researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, working at the intersection of technology, law and discrimination. I recently performed an empirical experiment involving commercial artificial intelligence (AI) image-generation tools. In structured testing across 25 of the widely used paid AI image-generation and headshot platforms, I found a rather consistent pattern.

When photographs of hijab-wearing women were uploaded, 22 out of the 25 platforms removed the hijab entirely and replaced it with AI-generated hair. The remaining three produced inconsistent results, sometimes retaining a distorted or partial version of the head covering. The pattern appeared across multiple services, suggesting a systemic design issue rather than an isolated glitch.

The harms caused by AI systems are already well documented, from Amazon's hiring algorithm discriminating against women to Grok generating harmful images that triggered international criticism. But one dimension has received far less attention, the erasure of religious identity. In these tests, the hijab was not mis-rendered or inaccurately drawn. It was removed altogether.

These findings raise concerns that go beyond technical errors. The users did not request the removal of the religious head covering, and during image processing there was no option to retain the hijab or to consent to its removal. The alteration occurred automatically. The consistency of the outputs also suggests possible exclusion or underrepresentation in the training data used to build these systems.

For Muslim women who wear it, hijab is a matter of dignity and religious identity, not simply a stylistic feature. When identity markers are silently erased, the issue is not only bias, but also structural exclusion, consent and accountability. If models trained on limited data are then deployed worldwide, the consequences extend far beyond a single image. What obligations do AI companies have when their products systematically reshape how certain groups appear? And what remedies are available when those systems are built in one jurisdiction and used worldwide?

Mahwish Moazzam
Berkeley, USA

The ethics of water use

I went to the local water filtration plant recently and saw a man washing his car using filtered water meant for human consumption. He kept filling a large bottle with the water and pouring it over the car. When I objected, he responded that he had done nothing wrong. Many might say that I am over-reacting, or this is 'normal' in Pakistan. The fact is that for a moment I also thought I was, but when I came

home and did a little research, I got to know that the rough estimate of water that I had seen being wasted by that man at the filtration plant far exceeded the average amount of water people in Pakistan have per day.

According to reports released by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef), more than two billion people globally still lack access to safe drinking water. We always hear about the water crisis, but our behaviour suggests we are not serious about the matter in our daily choices. I have seen individuals washing their vehicles from tap water, using a water-saving nozzle, which reduces wastage and does not involve drinking water. This is what a responsible approach looks like.

While industrial wastage is also a serious issue, it should not become an excuse for individual ignorance. We all have to take responsibility. If we see people wasting drinking water just to shine their vehicles, we need to point that out to them. It is our responsibility to pass a better world to our generations.

Khaqan Ali Khan
Islamabad

The ill-timed exam reform

I teach English to Karachi board's class IX and X students at a private secondary school. We, the teachers, have been asked by the school administration to brief our students about the e-answer sheet that will be used as per the relevant instructions issued by the Sindh government.

As is common knowledge, matriculation exams are just round the corner, and now when schools have already finished their syllabus and conducted preliminary exams, the government has woken up from its deep slumber to inform that the examinations would now be conducted in a different manner.

Although we had already taken tests and exams in our school in line with the previous system, we agreed to guide the students to the best of our capability. While searching about the e-answer system, I saw a video posted by the government on its official website. I gathered the information that students will have to write one answer on each page, and they will have to start a new answer on a new page. The authorities have not clarified about Urdu and English papers where there are two parts of multiple choice questions (MCQs); one is literature and the other one is language.

Moreover, both subjects have several parts of many questions. For example, in English section B, the second question has seven parts, and then there is another question 'Do as directed', which has 20 points with different sections and parts. The same is the case with the Urdu paper. I wonder how our students will handle the exams when their teachers have no clue about the new system. We neither have

any briefing from the government nor from the school. It is all a big lump of confusion.

Tahmina Mahfooz
Karachi

The competitiveness gap

The recent data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) reveals a deeply troubling picture regarding the nation's external trade performance, which demands immediate attention of our policymakers. According to the figures, Pakistan's merchandise exports plummeted by 20.41 per cent in December 2025 compared to the preceding year, falling to \$2.317 billion. This is not merely a seasonal fluctuation; it marks the fifth consecutive month of decline in the current fiscal year.

As a result of this downward trajectory and a concurrent surge in imports, which rose by 13.49pc in December alone to reach \$6.02 billion, the trade gap has widened by nearly 35pc to \$19.20 billion in the first half of FY2025-26. While some official quarters appear unalarmed, the reality for our export-based industries is stark.

Our exporters are losing their competitive edge not due to a lack of skill or capacity, but because the domestic cost of doing business has become unsustainable.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the energy sector. The textile industry, which remains our dominant export contributor, is currently grappling with electricity tariffs averaging 12 cents per unit. In contrast, our regional rivals operate at 7-8 cents, giving them a clearly decisive advantage in the global market. This disparity, combined with escalating LNG prices for captive power plants, has contributed to a 9pc drop in textile exports and a staggering 35-40pc plunge in food exports for the month of December.

Furthermore, the trade deficit with nine neighbouring countries, including China and Afghanistan, has surged by over 44pc, reflecting persistent regional pressures and structural bottlenecks. To reverse these trends, we must look beyond press declarations, and commit to deep structural reforms.

As highlighted in some recent reports, the path to recovery must include the full implementation of the National Tariff Policy to rationalise duties on raw materials and the swift operationalisation of the Exim Bank of Pakistan in order to provide necessary trade finance.

Without a consistent, export-led growth policy and immediate relief regarding energy pricing, Pakistan risks a permanent loss of market share, and a recurring balance-of-payments crisis. It is high time Pakistan prioritised the competitiveness of its manufacturing sector so as to target long-term macroeconomic stabilisation.

Syed Ejaz Muzaffar
Karachi

Giant 10-person 'flying taxi' passes first flight test in China

Alan Bradley

A Chinese company successfully flew a 5-ton (4,536-kilogram) electric vertical takeoff and landing aircraft (eVTOL) in a new feat for electric aircraft. Its makers at Fengfei Aviation claim it's the largest eVTOL to ever complete a test flight. During the test flight, the V5000 aircraft lifted off in VTOL mode, switched to fixed-wing mode for a short flight, and then transitioned back to VTOL mode to safely land. VTOL vehicles mimic helicopters, enabling them to lift off and land on helipads or in other smaller spaces without requiring supporting infrastructure, such as the runways used by fixed-wing aircraft. The test took place at Kunshan Civil Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Test Flight Operation Base in Jiangsu Province, a site Fengfei Aviation uses for public demos and AP press flights. There are several variants of the aircraft — a purely electric version can reach 155 miles (250 kilometers), and a hybrid-power alternative can fly for 932 miles (1,500 km), company representatives said in a statement posted to LinkedIn. The V5000 also comes in two variants, depending on the cargo it's intended to transport. The passenger version, evocatively dubbed the "Sky Dragon," can haul up to 10 passengers. Fengfei's English brand, AutoFlight, has developed an alternate version called the V5000 Matrix, which can transport around a ton (907 kg) of freight. Both versions are built around a 39-inch (20-meter) wide compound wing, supported by a three-surface aerodynamic layout and 20 lift motors. Including 20 motors in the design provides redundancy in case some fail. Several companies have begun exploring eVTOLs for commercial taxi services, such as Joby Aviation, which has signed a six year exclusive deal to operate air taxis in Dubai, and EHang's pilotless EH216 S, approved for commercial low altitude tourism flights in China.



Exercise may help counter depressive, anxiety-like symptoms

Deep Shukla

Exercise can help moderate some of the adverse effects of an unhealthy diet on depression-like symptoms in rats, according to a recent study published in *Brain Medicine*.



The study, conducted in a rat model, showed that exercise helped reduce depressive and anxiety-like symptoms induced by a high-fat, high-sugar diet. The study's findings suggest that exercise could mitigate the effects of an unhealthy diet on mood by normalizing levels of metabolic hormones, such as insulin and leptin, and attenuating the decline in certain metabolites produced by the gut microbiome.

The study's lead author, Yvonne Nolan, professor in anatomy and neuroscience at University College Cork, said, "Our findings provide important proof-of-concept that exercise can mitigate some unhealthy diet-related mental health effects and point to specific biological pathways involved. More research is needed to confirm these effects in humans and understand the full mechanistic picture."

The ease of access to ultra-processed foods that are high in sugar and saturated fats has led to an upsurge in obesity and other metabolic conditions. This increase in the prevalence of obesity has been compounded by the lack of physical activity and sedentary lifestyles. Notably, the metabolic changes associated with the consumption of such a high-sugar, high-fat Western-style diet are also associated with an increased risk of mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety.

Flavanols in cocoa, berries may improve blood flow in sedentary people

Katharine Lang

Sitting for long periods is linked to declines in vascular function, particularly in the legs, even in people who are physically fit. Recent research suggests that adults in the United States sit for at least 6 hours every day, and adolescents even more.



Decline in vascular function can increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases, such as strokes and heart attacks. However, many of us have sedentary jobs, spend a lot of time travelling by car, train, or plane, or enjoy watching TV or playing computer games, so we may spend much of the day sitting down. Now, researchers from the University of Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, have found that flavanols may help counteract the effects of prolonged sitting.

In their small-scale study, published in *The Journal of Physiology*, researchers found that young men who drank a high-flavanol cocoa drink before sitting for 2 hours maintained better blood flow in the femoral (leg) and brachial (arm) arteries than those who drank a low-flavanol version of the drink. Researchers recruited 40 healthy men, ages between 18 and 34, into the study. Half were high in fitness, and half were low, as measured by a cardiorespiratory fitness test conducted by the researchers. Before the experimental visits, participants fasted for 12 hours, and avoided caffeine, alcohol, polyphenol-containing foods and drinks, and any vigorous exercise for 24 hours.

World's smallest QR code can store data for thousands of years

Fiona Jackson

Scientists have created the smallest QR code in the world, measuring just 3.07×10^{-9} square inches (1.98 square micrometers). It can preserve data for thousands of years and it's so small that you need



an electron microscope to see it. Each pixel of the QR code is just 49 nanometers across, even smaller than a bacterium, ensuring its place as a Guinness World Record. It was created by etching its grid into a thin ceramic film with a focused ion beam. It's about 37% the size of the previous world record holder and about 0.0000004% the size of a standard 0.8-square-inch (2 cm²) QR code. The code is too small for even an optical microscope to visualize because the pixels are smaller than the wavelength of visible light and the light waves won't be scattered by its minute details. Only an electron microscope, which fires electron beams with a wavelength in the picometer scale (10-11 inches), can resolve it. The creation of a data-storage unit on such a tiny scale opens up the potential for extremely high storage density. The scientists at TU Wien in Austria, who developed the QR code in collaboration with data-storage firm Cerabyte, estimate that over 2 terabytes of data could fit onto the surface area of a single A4 (8½ x 11) sheet of paper etched with the pixels — that's more data than you can keep on most consumer laptops.

In contrast, the same area covered in 0.8 square inch (2 cm²) Version 1 QR codes would hold only about 2.5 kilobytes, the equivalent of a page of plain text.

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