

# WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

## THE IMPACT OF THE MIDDLE EAST WAR ON PAKISTAN'S FOOD SECURITY





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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](http://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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# The impact of the Middle East war on Pakistan's food security

Nasim Ahmed

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has sent far-reaching ripples across the global economy, affecting countries in ways that many had not anticipated. Among those facing significant and multifaceted repercussions is Pakistan, where the war's impact on food security is becoming increasingly visible and concerning. As a country heavily reliant on imports for key food commodities such as wheat, edible oils, and pulses, Pakistan is particularly vulnerable to external shocks. The economic aftereffects of the Middle East conflict are now being felt through rising prices, disrupted supply chains, and increasing uncertainty in global markets.

A key factor exacerbating the situation is the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, a critical maritime trade corridor through which approximately 20 percent of global oil and liquefied natural gas supplies pass, along with roughly one-third (25–35 percent) of global fertilizer shipments. In addition, nearly half of the world's traded sulphur, an essential component in phosphatic fertilizers, is transported through this route. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is increasingly restricting these vital flows. One of the most immediate consequences is the strain on fertilizer supply. Countries in the Gulf region collectively account for nearly half of global urea exports and a substantial share of ammonia and sulphur trade. Disruptions in LNG supplies have constrained nitrogen fertilizer production, while reduced refining activity has tightened sulphur availability for phosphatic fertilizers. This dual shock is translating into widespread shortages and escalating prices.

Agriculture in Pakistan, being highly energy-intensive, is directly affected by these developments. Diesel is widely used to power tractors and tube wells, while electricity is essential for sustaining irrigation systems. Rising fuel prices are significantly increasing the cost of irrigation, land preparation, and harvesting. This is particularly detrimental in groundwater-dependent regions, where higher diesel costs directly limit water extraction, thereby reducing crop yields and overall agricultural productivity.

Another major consequence of the conflict is the disruption of global food supply chains. The broader region, including countries such as Russia and Ukraine, plays a critical role in global agricultural exports, especially wheat, which is a staple in Pakistan's diet. Pri-

or to the conflict, these countries accounted for a significant share of Pakistan's wheat imports. However, with the intensification of hostilities and instability in trade routes, Pakistan is now facing considerable difficulty in sourcing wheat at affordable prices and in sufficient quantities.

The country had already been grappling with wheat shortages due to a series of poor harvests in recent years, further aggravated by unpredictable climate change patterns affecting domestic agriculture. In 2022, Pakistan was compelled to import wheat at exceptionally high prices from countries such as the United States and Canada. However, continued volatility in international markets, largely driven by geopolitical tensions and conflict, has rendered such emergency measures increasingly unsustainable.

The rise in food prices is one of the most immediate and visible consequences



of the Middle East conflict for Pakistan's food security. The global surge in fuel prices, partly driven by the conflict, has significantly increased transportation and logistics costs associated with food distribution. This has, in turn, contributed to inflation in the prices of essential food items across the country. Staples such as rice, fruits, and vegetables have become more expensive, placing additional strain on household budgets and making it increasingly difficult for many families to meet their daily nutritional requirements.

Pakistan's domestic agricultural productivity has also been adversely affected in multiple ways. The war has driven up global fertilizer prices, with major exporters such as Russia playing a crucial role in the international supply chain. As a result, local farmers, who were already struggling with rising input costs, now face even greater challenges in affording the fertilizers necessary to maintain and improve crop yields.

At the same time, the conflict has inten-

sified Pakistan's ongoing energy crisis. As global oil prices rise due to geopolitical instability in the Middle East, the costs associated with operating agricultural machinery, transporting goods, and powering irrigation systems continue to increase. Given that large areas of Pakistan's agricultural land, particularly in provinces such as Sindh and Punjab, depend heavily on irrigation, the resulting increase in production costs poses a serious threat to overall food output.

Beyond rising prices and production challenges, the Middle East conflict is also having a profound impact on livelihoods. Millions of Pakistanis depend on agriculture and related sectors for their income. Small-scale farmers, especially those in rural areas, are particularly vulnerable, as they face difficulties in accessing affordable credit, quality seeds, and essential inputs. While larger agricultural enterprises may have the financial capacity to absorb some of these shocks, small farmers, laborers, and seasonal workers are disproportionately bearing the burden of rising costs and economic uncertainty.

In response to the mounting crisis, the government of Pakistan has initiated several measures aimed at ensuring food security. These include increasing wheat imports and engaging in negotiations with countries such as Russia to secure supplies at relatively lower prices, thereby enabling the provision of subsidized food to low-income households. However, these measures, while necessary, are not sufficient on their own.

Pakistan must adopt a more comprehensive and forward-looking strategy to address its food security challenges. This includes investing in long-term agricultural reforms, promoting sustainable and climate-resilient farming practices, and improving water management systems to mitigate the effects of drought and environmental degradation. Additionally, the country must diversify its sources of food imports to reduce reliance on regions affected by geopolitical instability. Strengthening trade relations with countries in Africa, Latin America, and other regions could provide a more stable and resilient supply base.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East serves as a stark reminder of the deep interconnectedness of the global food system. It underscores the urgent need for Pakistan to strengthen its agricultural sector, reduce external vulnerabilities, and build a more resilient and sustainable food system capable of withstanding future shocks

# Rising inflation to push more Pakistanis below the poverty line

Farhan Khan

According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for March increased by 7.3 percent year-on-year, up from 7 percent recorded in February, reflecting a rise of 0.3 percentage points. On a month-on-month basis, the increase was more pronounced, rising from 0.3 percent in February to 1.2 percent in March. Core inflation in urban areas also inched upward from 0.2 percent in February to 0.7 percent in March, marking an increase of 0.5 percentage points, while rural inflation rose from 0.4 percent to 0.8 percent during the same period, registering a 0.4 percentage point increase.

This escalation is largely attributable to volatility in food and energy prices, driven in part by the ongoing Middle East conflict. A sustained rise in inflationary pressure continues to make life increasingly difficult for the average household in Pakistan, particularly in a country where a significant proportion of the population lives below the poverty line. In this context, a recent report by the Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) has estimated the poverty rate at 43.5 percent—14.3 percentage points higher than the official figure reported by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

The discrepancy between these estimates stems from differing methodologies. The SPDC employs a calorific or food energy intake approach, which defines poverty based on minimum caloric requirements necessary for basic sustenance and calculates the level of household expenditure required to meet those needs. In contrast, the PBS uses the cost of basic needs approach, which updates the poverty line based on the Consumer Price Index rather than deriving it from fresh household-level data.

It is also noteworthy that the World Bank has used a similar caloric-based methodology, estimating Pakistan's poverty rate at 42.4 percent for 2025, based on a threshold of 3.65 dollars per day in 2017 purchasing power parity terms. The World Bank has attributed the rise in poverty since 2020 to economic instability and persistent inflation, noting that "a series of overlapping crises have exposed weaknesses in the country's poverty reduction trajectory." Furthermore, the Bank estimates that a population growth rate of 2 percent has resulted in approximately 1.9 million additional individuals falling into poverty during the last fiscal year.

On the other hand, the SPDC argues

that the average consumption basket used in calculating the CPI is disproportionately influenced by the spending patterns of relatively better-off households. This approach tends to overlook regional disparities, particularly in remote and underdeveloped areas, and includes goods and services that are not relevant to low-income households. At the same time, it fails to adequately capture essential expenditures such as informal healthcare and access to clean drinking water, both of which constitute a significant burden for poorer segments of the population.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its December 2024 loan approval documentation, also highlighted structural weaknesses in Pakistan's statistical systems. It noted that "important shortcomings remain in the source data available for sectors accounting for around a third of GDP," along with concerns regarding the granularity and reliability of Government Finance Statistics. These limitations prompted the IMF to extend technical assistance to the PBS, including support for the development of a new Producer Price Index and the initiation of fieldwork for four major surveys ahead of the planned National Accounts rebasing in fiscal year 2026.

Despite signs of macroeconomic stabilization and a decline in inflation over the past two years, Pakistan's economic growth rate of 2.6 percent remains insufficient to significantly reduce poverty levels. External remittances have shown strong growth, increasing by 33 percent during the first half of fiscal year 2025. However, their impact on the poorest segments of society remains limited, as only 3.2 percent of the lowest-income households receive remittance inflows. Nevertheless, for households just above the poverty line, remittances play a critical role in preventing downward mobility in the face of economic shocks. Increased emigration since 2020, particularly among low-skilled workers, has somewhat broadened the reach of remittance benefits to lower-income groups.

On the social protection front, recent increases in benefits under the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), exceeding the rate of inflation, along with plans to expand coverage to an additional 500,000 households by the end of the fiscal year, are expected to support household consumption and provide a buffer against short-term economic pressures.

However, the effectiveness of these measures has been undermined by ongoing

external shocks, particularly those linked to the Middle East conflict. In light of these challenges, there is an urgent need to develop and implement a comprehensive, long-term strategy to address poverty in Pakistan.

One of the most effective pathways to poverty reduction lies in improving access to quality education. Pakistan has a large and growing youth population, yet many lack the skills required for gainful employment. Increased investment in education, particularly in technical and vocational training, can equip the workforce with skills aligned to the demands of emerging industries. Government initiatives aimed at expanding vocational training programs and reducing school dropout rates could yield significant long-term benefits.

A substantial proportion of Pakistan's poor population resides in rural areas, where access to essential services such as healthcare, sanitation, and education remains limited. Empowering these communities through improved infrastructure, access to micro-finance, and the promotion of agricultural innovation can enhance productivity and generate sustainable livelihoods. Collaboration between the government and non-governmental organizations can further strengthen grassroots development initiatives tailored to local needs.

Social safety net programs such as BISP have played a vital role in providing financial assistance to vulnerable households. Expanding these programs, with improved targeting mechanisms, can help lift more people out of poverty. Additionally, ensuring access to affordable healthcare and nutrition services would significantly improve overall living standards.

To stimulate broader economic growth, Pakistan must also prioritize the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Encouraging entrepreneurship through policy incentives, improved access to credit, and business development support can foster innovation and create employment opportunities, particularly in underserved regions.

Addressing poverty in Pakistan requires a coordinated and sustained effort involving the government, civil society, and the private sector. By investing in human capital, strengthening rural economies, expanding social protection, and promoting entrepreneurship, Pakistan can make meaningful progress toward reducing poverty and building a more inclusive and resilient economic future.

# Growth without gains

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's poverty situation has come under renewed scrutiny after fresh estimates suggested that the scale of deprivation may be significantly higher than official figures indicate. The Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) has placed the country's poverty rate at 43.5 percent, sharply exceeding the 28.9 percent reported by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) based on the latest Household Integrated Economic Survey for 2024–25. This substantial divergence has reignited debate over how poverty is measured and whether existing methods accurately capture the lived realities of millions of households.

At the core of the discrepancy lies a fundamental difference in methodology. The SPDC relies on a calorific or food energy intake approach, which defines poverty in terms of the minimum daily caloric requirements necessary for basic survival. It then estimates the level of household expenditure required to meet these needs. In contrast, the PBS employs the cost of basic needs approach, which updates the poverty line using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rather than recalculating it based on fresh household consumption data. While both methods are widely used, they often yield different outcomes, particularly in economies experiencing rapid inflation and structural changes.

The calorific method used by SPDC aligns closely with the approach adopted by the World Bank, which has also presented a more alarming picture. In its recent assessment, the World Bank estimated Pakistan's poverty rate at 42.4 percent for 2025, using a threshold of \$3.65 per day adjusted for purchasing power parity. The Bank attributed this sharp increase to prolonged economic instability, high inflation, and a series of overlapping crises that have undermined earlier gains in poverty reduction. According to its analysis, population growth of around 2 percent annually has further compounded the problem, pushing an estimated 1.9 million additional people into poverty in the last fiscal year alone.

Beyond methodological differences, the SPDC has raised concerns about the adequacy of the CPI as a tool for measuring poverty. It argues that the consumption basket used to calculate inflation is largely based on the spending patterns of relatively better-off households. As a result, it may fail to reflect the actual expenses faced by low-income families, particularly those living in rural or remote ar-

reas. Essential costs such as informal healthcare, access to clean drinking water, and regional price variations are often underrepresented or ignored altogether. This, the Centre contends, leads to an underestimation of the true cost of living for the poor.

Data limitations have also been acknowledged at the international level. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its December 2024 loan documentation, highlighted significant shortcomings in Pakistan's statistical systems. It noted that gaps remain in data covering sectors that account for nearly one-third of the country's GDP, along with issues related to the reliability and detail of government finance statistics. In response, the IMF has extended technical assistance to the PBS, supporting efforts to improve data collection and develop new indices, including a Producer



Price Index. Additionally, large-scale surveys are currently underway as part of preparations for the rebasing of national accounts, expected to be completed by mid-2026.

Despite some signs of macroeconomic stabilisation, the broader economic environment remains insufficient to reduce poverty meaningfully. The World Bank has pointed out that economic growth of around 2.6 percent is simply too low to generate the level of job creation and income expansion needed to lift large segments of the population out of poverty. While remittance inflows have increased significantly—rising by 33 percent in the first half of fiscal year 2025—their benefits are unevenly distributed. Only a small fraction of the poorest households receive remittances, limiting their impact on those most in need.

However, remittances do play an important role for households that are just above the poverty line. For these vulnerable groups, financial support from abroad can act as a buffer against economic shocks, preventing them from slipping into poverty. The recent rise in outward migration, particularly among

low-skilled workers, may gradually expand the reach of remittances to poorer segments of society, although this is likely to be a slow and uneven process.

On the policy front, social protection programmes have provided some relief. The government has increased payments under the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) beyond the rate of inflation and plans to extend coverage to an additional 500,000 households by the end of the fiscal year. These measures are expected to support consumption among low-income families and offer some protection against short-term economic pressures. Nevertheless, such interventions remain limited in scale relative to the magnitude of the poverty challenge.

Recent global developments have further complicated the situation. The ongoing

conflict in the Middle East has introduced new economic uncertainties, including rising energy prices and disruptions to trade. These factors have the potential to fuel inflation and reduce economic activity, thereby eroding the effectiveness of domestic policy measures aimed at protecting vulnerable populations. While diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions are ongoing, the risk of further escalation remains, posing additional threats to economic stability.

The widening gap between different poverty estimates underscores the urgent need for a more comprehensive and accurate measurement framework. Without reliable data, policymakers face significant challenges in designing targeted interventions and allocating resources effectively. It also raises broader questions about the inclusiveness of economic growth and whether existing policies are reaching those who need them most.

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a critical juncture in its fight against poverty. While official figures suggest moderate progress, alternative estimates paint a far more troubling picture. The divergence highlights not only methodological issues but also deeper structural challenges within the economy. Addressing poverty will require more than statistical adjustments; it demands sustained economic growth, improved data systems, and a stronger commitment to inclusive policies. Without these, the risk is that a significant portion of the population will remain trapped in a cycle of deprivation, even as headline economic indicators show signs of improvement.

# FBR's losing battle against shrinking tax base

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's fiscal challenges have deepened as the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) once again fell significantly short of its tax collection targets. The shortfall, which has widened to Rs610 billion during the first nine months of fiscal year 2026, highlights persistent structural weaknesses in the country's revenue system. With economic activity slowing and external pressures intensifying due to the ongoing Middle East conflict, the likelihood of meeting the full-year tax target appears increasingly remote.

The revenue gap expanded further in March, largely driven by disruptions in trade flows and a broader economic slowdown linked to rising geopolitical tensions. These factors have negatively affected imports, which are a major source of tax collection, particularly through sales tax at the import stage. As a result, the FBR's performance has been undermined at a critical time when the government is under pressure to stabilise public finances and meet international commitments.

Despite these challenges, the government has taken some corrective steps to prevent the fiscal situation from deteriorating further. One of the most significant measures has been the decision to pass on the impact of rising international oil prices to domestic consumers. By doing so, the government has attempted to limit the growth of the petroleum differential claim (PDC), thereby avoiding an increase in subsidies that could further strain the fiscal balance. This move is seen as necessary to keep the primary fiscal deficit target—set at Rs2 trillion, or 1.6 percent of GDP—within reach.

However, this adjustment comes at a cost. Higher fuel prices are likely to contribute to inflationary pressures, which may dampen consumption and economic activity. At the same time, the underlying issue of weak tax collection remains unresolved. The decline in import volumes has led to lower sales tax revenues, particularly affecting sectors such as energy and gas, where the value chain has been disrupted.

Looking ahead, the situation becomes even more challenging. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has proposed an ambitious tax collection target of Rs15.6 trillion for the next fiscal year, along with additional measures aimed at generating Rs400 billion in new revenue. This target appears increasingly unrealistic, especially given that the revised target

for the current year—Rs13.98 trillion—is already expected to be missed by a substantial margin. Achieving a significantly higher target in the following year would require a dramatic improvement in both economic conditions and tax administration, which seems unlikely under current circumstances.

Compounding the difficulty is the IMF's apparent reluctance to adjust its expectations. The rigid stance taken by the Fund suggests that the government may have limited room to provide tax relief to key segments of the economy. Plans to gradually reduce the super tax and ease the burden on salaried individuals could be delayed or scaled back, as authorities prioritise revenue generation over relief measures.



Another critical condition set by the IMF relates to the release of a \$1.2 billion loan tranche, which is contingent upon the recovery of Rs322 billion from court cases already decided in favour of the FBR. While the tax authority has made progress, collecting close to Rs300 billion so far, the remaining amount must be secured to unlock the funds. This adds another layer of urgency to an already strained fiscal environment.

Much of the additional revenue collected in recent months has come from the formal sector, particularly large corporations and high-income individuals. This includes taxes imposed under the super tax regime, which has placed a significant burden on businesses operating within the documented economy. While the government has expressed a desire to reduce reliance on the formal sector, the reality suggests otherwise. Instead of broadening the tax base, existing taxpayers continue to face increased pressure.

This imbalance has had tangible economic consequences. Multinational companies have begun to reassess their presence in Pakistan, with some choosing to exit the market altogether. The manufacturing sector, in particular, has seen a contraction in its

formal footprint, leading to job losses and reduced industrial output. At the same time, the country's dependence on imports has grown, undermining efforts to promote export-led growth—a key objective of economic policy.

One of the central issues highlighted by the current situation is the failure to expand the tax net. Several sectors of the economy remain largely untaxed or under-taxed. Agricultural income, for instance, contributes minimally to overall tax revenues, despite its significant share in the economy. Provincial governments have set low collection targets for farm income, reflecting a lack of political will to bring this sector into the tax net.

Similarly, the livestock sector remains outside the effective tax framework, partly due to jurisdictional ambiguities. Retailers, wholesalers, and traders—who form a substantial portion of the economy—also contribute far less than their potential share. This uneven distribution of the tax burden places disproportionate pressure on urban, documented sectors, exacerbating economic inequality and discouraging formalisation.

The continuation of this trend poses serious risks to Pakistan's fiscal sustainability. If the Middle East conflict persists, the resulting economic slowdown could further reduce tax revenues while increasing expenditure needs. In such a scenario, the government may face the difficult decision of declaring a financial emergency—a step that, while constitutionally permissible, would have far-reaching implications for economic stability and investor confidence. To avoid such an outcome, urgent reforms are required. Expanding the tax base must become a central priority, with a focus on bringing previously untaxed sectors into the system. This would not only increase revenue but also distribute the tax burden more equitably. At the same time, improving tax administration and reducing leakages could enhance efficiency and compliance.

In conclusion, Pakistan's fiscal outlook remains under significant strain as the FBR struggles to meet its targets amid a challenging economic environment. While short-term measures have helped contain some risks, the underlying structural issues persist. Without decisive action to broaden the tax base and implement meaningful reforms, the country's fiscal position will remain vulnerable. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring long-term economic stability and sustainable growth.

# Global energy risks threaten Pakistan's hard-won gains

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economy is showing signs of steady recovery, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) revising its growth forecast upward for the current fiscal year. In its latest economic outlook, the Manila-based lender projected that Pakistan's gross domestic product (GDP) will expand by 3.5 percent in fiscal year 2026, reflecting improved industrial performance and a gradual return of investor confidence. While this marks a positive shift from earlier estimates, the ADB has cautioned that external challenges—particularly geopolitical tensions in the Middle East—could pose serious risks to the country's economic stability.

The revised outlook represents a modest but meaningful improvement from the previously projected 3 percent growth. The ADB expects this upward trend to continue into the medium term, forecasting economic growth of 4.5 percent in fiscal year 2027. This anticipated expansion is largely attributed to a recovery in manufacturing, increased private investment, and progress in implementing structural reforms aimed at stabilising the economy.

According to the report, Pakistan's recent economic performance reflects a degree of resilience despite a challenging global environment. Stabilisation measures, including tighter fiscal management and monetary discipline, have begun to yield results. ADB officials noted that reform efforts have played a key role in restoring confidence and setting the stage for sustainable growth. However, they emphasised that maintaining this momentum will require consistent policy implementation and continued commitment to reform.

Inflation, which had eased significantly in the previous fiscal year, is expected to rise again. The ADB projects average inflation to reach 6.4 percent in fiscal year 2026 and 6.5 percent in fiscal year 2027. This increase is primarily linked to rising global energy prices and disruptions in trade routes caused by ongoing tensions in the Middle East. As Pakistan relies heavily on oil and gas imports, fluctuations in global energy markets have a direct impact on domestic prices and overall economic stability.

The central bank is expected to respond cautiously by easing monetary policy in a controlled manner. The aim will be to keep inflation within the medium-term target range of 5 to 7 percent while supporting economic growth. However, the ADB warned that any aggressive policy easing could undermine macroeconomic stability and lead to renewed

pressure on the balance of payments.

One of the key concerns highlighted in the report is the potential impact of a prolonged Middle East conflict. Higher energy and fertiliser costs could increase production expenses across agriculture and industry, leading to reduced output. Additionally, such instability may disrupt remittance flows from overseas workers, particularly those based in Gulf countries, further straining Pakistan's external accounts.

Despite these risks, domestic economic activity is expected to remain relatively strong. Large-scale manufacturing has already shown encouraging signs, with output growing by 4.8 percent in the first half of fiscal year 2026. Key sectors such as automobiles, cement, and textiles have benefited from lower inflation, improved credit availability, and renewed business confidence. This rebound has been a significant driver of overall economic growth.



The services sector is also poised to expand, supported by improvements in industry and greater macroeconomic stability. Early data from the first quarter of fiscal year 2026 indicates growth of 3.7 percent, driven by sectors such as trade, transport, construction, and utilities. Construction, in particular, has experienced a notable surge, growing by 21 percent during the same period. This growth has been fuelled by government incentives introduced in the fiscal year 2026 budget, as well as reconstruction efforts following recent floods.

On the demand side, private investment is expected to play a crucial role in sustaining economic growth. Improved macroeconomic conditions, along with reduced government borrowing, are likely to free up financial resources for private sector lending. This is expected to benefit small and medium enterprises, as well as the agricultural sector, which remains a cornerstone of Pakistan's economy.

Privatisation efforts are also expected to contribute to increased investment. The planned revival of privatisation initiatives, including the sale of major state-owned enter-

prises such as Pakistan International Airlines, could attract both domestic and foreign investors. Meanwhile, private consumption is projected to recover gradually as inflation stabilises and household incomes improve.

However, external imbalances remain a significant challenge. The current account, which had shown signs of improvement, is projected to return to a deficit in fiscal year 2026. Rising global energy prices are expected to increase the import bill, while export performance remains under pressure. In the first seven months of the fiscal year, the current account deficit reached \$1.2 billion, reversing a surplus recorded in the previous year.

Imports have grown due to increased demand for machinery, automobiles, and industrial inputs, reflecting higher economic activity. At the same time, exports have declined, partly due to flood-related crop damage that affected agricultural output, particularly rice. The absence of sugar exports in the first half of the fiscal year has further contributed to the decline. Despite these challenges, remittance inflows have remained relatively strong, providing some support to the external account.

The ADB stressed that Pakistan is at a critical juncture in its economic journey. While recent progress is encouraging, the country must address long-standing structural issues in areas such as energy, trade, and state-owned enterprises. Failure to do so could lead to policy slippage and undermine the gains achieved through recent reforms.

Globally, the economic outlook remains uncertain. The Middle East conflict has introduced new risks, including volatile energy prices and disruptions to global trade. These factors could have far-reaching implications not only for Pakistan but also for the broader Asia-Pacific region. The ADB projects regional growth to moderate slightly, with inflation expected to rise due to higher energy costs.

In conclusion, Pakistan's economic outlook appears cautiously optimistic, with growth expected to strengthen in the coming years. However, this recovery is far from secure. External shocks, particularly those stemming from geopolitical tensions, could quickly reverse progress. To navigate these challenges, Pakistan will need to maintain prudent economic policies, accelerate structural reforms, and build resilience against global uncertainties. Only through sustained and disciplined efforts can the country achieve stable and inclusive economic growth in the years ahead.

# Empowering voters through media

Raza Khan

Democracy as a system of governance fundamentally depends on periodic and regular elections at multiple tiers, including national, provincial, and local levels. However, democracy can only truly flourish when these elections are conducted in a fair, transparent, and credible manner. More importantly, such fairness and transparency can only be ensured when the electorate is fully aware of the essence of democracy, understands its right to make informed choices, and is equipped to guard against electoral malpractice and fraud.

Local government (LG) bodies in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province recently completed their tenure in March, while those in Balochistan and Sindh are expected to complete their respective terms by June 2026. According to constitutional provisions, LG elections must be held within 120 days of the completion of tenure. In contrast, local government elections in Punjab are significantly overdue, as the previous bodies completed their tenure as far back as 2021. Consequently, elections in the province could be held at any time. Local governments are widely regarded as the foundational building blocks of democracy. Therefore, unless voters are adequately informed about their rights, the profiles and agendas of candidates, and the proper exercise of their right to vote, the mere conduct of elections remains insufficient for meaningful democratic consolidation.

In essence, local government elections occupy a central place in any democratic system, while the role of the voter remains pivotal. The voter serves as the axis around which the entire democratic political structure revolves. Electoral outcomes—whether in favor of or against a political force—are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, among which communication plays a critical role. In contemporary mass societies, the most effective means of informing voters about political realities is through both traditional mass media and modern social media platforms. A mass society is not merely defined by the presence of large populations, but rather by the impersonal and often indirect nature of social interactions within it.

At the global level, however, media

trends indicate increasing localization and specialization, a phenomenon often described as de-massification. Given that local government systems operate at the grassroots level, the most suitable and effective tools for voter education are local media outlets and, more significantly, social media-based virtual communities that can directly engage specific audiences.

In a country like Pakistan, where nearly half of the population remains illiterate and where electoral systems and laws are not systematically included in educational curricula, mainstream and social media emerge as the most efficient channels for public awareness and voter education. Electronic media, including television, radio, and especially social media networks, possess extensive reach that transcends geographical and social barriers, enabling the dissemination of information to a wide audience. With a significant portion of the population now having access to these platforms, educating citizens about electoral processes, issues, and the importance of voting is both feasible and necessary.

However, the role of media should not be limited to the mere dissemination of information. Information, in itself, is only a means to an end. If media confines itself to providing facts without fostering understanding, it risks becoming an exercise in futility. The ultimate objective must be to educate citizens about the critical issues facing the state and society, and to persuade them that only through active and informed participation can capable and accountable leadership emerge to address these challenges. Voters must be made aware not only of the importance of their vote but also of the consequences of political apathy and non-participation.

Achieving this objective requires not just effective communication, but also positive and strategic communication. Media messages must be carefully crafted, taking into account the psychological makeup of target audiences. This involves shaping content in a manner that resonates with individuals and influences their attitudes and behavior. In this regard, the psychodynamic model of mass communication offers valuable insights. This model is based on the premise that media messages do not have a

uniform impact; rather, their effectiveness varies according to individual characteristics and psychological dispositions. It emphasizes that meaningful persuasion can be achieved by influencing the internal psychological framework of individuals, thereby encouraging desired behavioral responses—in this case, informed and active electoral participation.

For media to perform this role effectively, it must also invest in building its own capacity. Media professionals need a deeper understanding of political issues, their underlying dynamics, and potential solutions in order to produce content that is both informative and transformative.

In Pakistan, social and political institutions—apart from family and religious structures—remain relatively weak. The limited participation of the general public in decision-making processes has contributed to a lack of social cohesion and diminished trust in institutions. As a result, electoral participation has often remained low, leading to an increased reliance on media as a primary source of information and influence.

Given this context, media institutions carry a significant responsibility. They must actively work to transform the attitudes of non-voters by presenting the electoral process and civic participation in a positive and engaging manner. At the same time, media must caution audiences against the passive consumption of information. Simply watching or listening to election-related content does not fulfill one's civic duty. There exists a latent paradox in media consumption, whereby audiences may feel satisfied with being informed without translating that awareness into action.

Ultimately, the future of democracy—and by extension, good governance—in Pakistan depends on informed, educated, and engaged voters who actively exercise their right to vote. This necessitates focused and sustained efforts to promote voter awareness and participation. The government must take the lead in this regard; however, if political considerations hinder such efforts, civil society organizations and the intellectual community must step forward to fill the gap. Only through collective action can Pakistan move toward a more participatory, accountable, and resilient democratic system.

# The curriculum conundrum

Rasheed Ali

In a modest classroom somewhere in Pakistan, a science teacher stands before a blackboard, carefully sketching the structure of an atom. The students copy it diligently into their notebooks, line by line, curve by curve. There are no models to hold, no lab to test hypotheses, no experiment to bring the invisible world alive. The atom remains what it has long been for generations of Pakistani students — not a discovery, but a diagram to memorise.

It is here, in such quiet classrooms scattered across the country, that the story of Pakistan's curriculum truly unfolds. Nearly eighty years after independence, the nation is still trying to answer a deceptively simple question: what — and how — should its children learn?

Over the decades, curricula have been revised, redesigned, and replaced with a frequency that has left teachers struggling to keep pace and students caught in cycles of adjustment.

Each reform arrives with promise, often ambitious and sweeping, yet implementation tells a more complicated story. The most recent and perhaps most ambitious of these efforts, the Single National Curriculum introduced during the tenure of Imran Khan, was envisioned as a great equalizer — a way to bridge the deep divides between elite private schools, under-resourced public institutions, and religious seminaries.

The idea carried an undeniable appeal. A child in a village and a child in a city, it promised, would open the same books, learn the same concepts, and, in theory, step into the future with equal footing. It was framed as a moral and national imperative, an attempt to end what policymakers described as “educational apartheid”. But as the policy moved from paper to practice, its contours began to blur.

In provinces like Sindh, resistance emerged, grounded not only in political considerations but in constitutional reality. The 18th Amendment had devolved education to provincial governments, making centralised curricular control a contentious proposition. What was conceived as a unifying force instead revealed the complexities of a federation still negotiating its balance of power.

Yet even where the curriculum was adopted, a deeper tension persisted. A uniform curriculum, many educationists argued, is not the same as a uniform education. A textbook cannot compensate for a classroom without electricity, a syllabus cannot substitute for a missing teacher, and a policy cannot erase the

disparities between institutions that exist worlds apart in resources and opportunity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in science education. On paper, the curriculum speaks the language of inquiry, experimentation, and discovery. In reality, the experience remains overwhelmingly theoretical. Laboratories, where they exist, are often under-equipped or inaccessible. Teachers, constrained by time, training, and resources, fall back on lectures and dictation. Students memorise definitions of force, energy, and motion without ever seeing them in action.

The result is a quiet but profound disconnect. Science, which should ignite curiosity and cultivate critical thinking, becomes another subject to reproduce in examinations. The numbers tell their own story. International assessments have repeatedly shown that a majority of Pakistani students struggle to meet even basic proficiency levels in mathematics and science. Behind these statistics lies a system that still rewards recall over reasoning.



The problem, many argue, is not merely what is taught, but how decisions about teaching are made. Curriculum reforms in Pakistan have often followed a top-down trajectory, crafted in policy circles far removed from the realities of classrooms. Teachers — the very people tasked with bringing these reforms to life — are rarely central to the conversation. The gap between design and delivery widens, and with it, the likelihood of meaningful change diminishes.

There are, however, pockets of possibility. Institutions such as the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development have begun to reimagine what science education can look like. Their approach shifts the focus from rote learning to inquiry-based methods, encouraging students to ask questions, test ideas, and connect scientific principles to everyday life. Low-cost experiments, digital simulations,

and interactive teaching strategies are slowly reshaping classrooms where these initiatives take root.

But scaling such models across a vast and uneven educational landscape remains a formidable challenge. It requires not only vision but sustained investment — something that has long been in short supply. Pakistan's education budget, constrained and often stretched thin, struggles to meet even the most basic needs. The sheer scale of the system compounds the difficulty. With millions of children still out of school, the task of building infrastructure, training teachers, and ensuring quality education for all appears daunting.

In this context, curriculum reform can seem like the most accessible lever of change. It is, after all, easier to revise a document than to rebuild a system. Yet this very ease may be its greatest limitation. Without parallel investments in teachers, facilities, and assessment systems, even the most thoughtfully designed curriculum risks becoming another layer in a

long history of well-intentioned experiments.

There is also a deeper philosophical question at play — one that goes beyond policy frameworks and political cycles. What kind of learners does Pakistan hope to cultivate? A system that prioritises memorisation produces students who can recall information but may struggle to apply it. A system that values inquiry, on the other hand, nurtures thinkers, innovators, and problem-solvers. The choice between the two is not merely educational; it is developmental, shaping the trajectory of the nation itself.

As Pakistan moves closer to its eightieth year, the classroom remains both a mirror and a measure of its aspirations. The blackboard sketches, the worn-out textbooks, the ambitious policies, and the persistent gaps all tell a story of a system in search of coherence. It is a story not of failure, but of unfinished work — of a nation still learning how to teach.

Whether the next chapter will bring consolidation or yet another experiment depends on choices that extend far beyond curriculum documents. It depends on whether reform is approached not as a series of isolated interventions, but as a sustained commitment to building an education system that is equitable, relevant, and responsive.

Until then, the atom on the blackboard will continue to be drawn, copied, and memorised — waiting, perhaps, for the day it can finally be understood.

# TB crisis in Pakistan demands urgent action beyond rhetoric

Dr. Fatima Khan

The latest figures released on World Tuberculosis Day by the World Health Organization have once again highlighted the alarming scale of tuberculosis (TB) in Pakistan, underscoring the urgent need for decisive and sustained action. Despite being both preventable and curable, TB remains one of the deadliest infectious diseases in the country, claiming tens of thousands of lives every year and affecting hundreds of thousands more.

According to the data, more than 669,000 people in Pakistan are infected with TB annually, while approximately 51,000 lose their lives to the disease. These figures are not just statistics; they represent a persistent public health failure in addressing a disease that the global community has long known how to control. Pakistan's position as the fifth-highest TB burden country in the world, and its staggering contribution of 73 percent of cases in the Eastern Mediterranean region, reflects the magnitude of the challenge and the gaps in the national response.

This year's theme, "Yes, We Can End TB—Powered by People," conveys a message of hope and collective responsibility. However, the situation on the ground tells a different story. With over 1,800 new cases emerging every day and around 140 deaths daily, the gap between ambition and implementation is stark. The warning from the WHO's country representative—that one person in Pakistan dies of TB every ten minutes—should serve as a powerful reminder of the urgency of the crisis. More importantly, the fact that these deaths are largely preventable raises serious questions about accountability and the effectiveness of current policies.

The concerns raised by the Pakistan Medical Association further highlight systemic weaknesses within the country's healthcare system. Chronic underfunding remains one of the most significant barriers to effective TB control. Public health spending has historically been low, limiting the government's ability to invest in infrastructure, medical supplies, and

human resources. As a result, many healthcare facilities lack the capacity to diagnose and treat TB patients efficiently. Shortages of essential medicines and diagnostic tools have also undermined efforts to control the disease. Interruptions in drug supply not only delay treatment but can also contribute to the development of drug-resistant strains of TB, which are far more difficult and expensive to treat. These challenges are compounded by a weak healthcare delivery system that struggles to reach remote and underserved communities, where TB prevalence is often highest.

Another critical issue is the lack of equitable access to healthcare. TB disproportionately affects low-income populations, who often face barriers such as limited awareness, financial constraints, and social stigma. Many patients delay seeking treatment due to fear of discrimination or lack of knowledge about the

crucial role in combating the disease. Beyond simply providing information, these campaigns must actively address the stigma associated with TB, which continues to be a major barrier to treatment. Encouraging open dialogue and community engagement can help create an environment where individuals feel safe to seek care without fear of social exclusion.

While international organisations such as the World Health Organization and Mercy Corps have been instrumental in supporting TB control efforts, the primary responsibility lies with the national government. Health policy must be treated as a central pillar of development rather than a secondary concern. Increased budgetary allocations, stronger governance, and better coordination between federal and provincial authorities are essential to building a resilient healthcare system.

Investing in public health is not merely a

moral obligation; it is also an economic necessity. A healthier population contributes to greater productivity, reduced healthcare costs, and overall national stability. Conversely, the continued spread of TB places a significant burden on the economy, affecting workforce participation and increasing public expenditure on healthcare.

The broader implications of the TB crisis extend beyond the health sector. Persistent high infection rates undermine progress in poverty reduction, education, and social development. In this context, tackling TB is not just about saving lives—it

is about securing the country's future.

In conclusion, the message of hope conveyed by this year's World Tuberculosis Day theme can only become a reality if it is backed by concrete and sustained action. Pakistan has the knowledge, resources, and international support needed to eliminate TB. What remains uncertain is whether there is sufficient political will to translate these advantages into meaningful progress. Without urgent reforms and a renewed commitment to public health, the country risks perpetuating a cycle of preventable illness and death. The time for action is now, and the cost of inaction is simply too high.



disease. This not only worsens health outcomes but also increases the risk of transmission within communities.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and sustained approach. Early detection must be prioritised through widespread screening and improved diagnostic capabilities. Ensuring an uninterrupted supply of medicines is equally essential, as is the establishment of patient support systems that encourage treatment adherence. Without these measures, efforts to control TB will remain fragmented and ineffective.

Public awareness campaigns also play a

# Israel is trying to change Jerusalem's religious identity

Xavier Abu Eid

On Holy Saturday as Palestinian Christians tried to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Israeli security forces started attacking and arresting them. On the following day, Orthodox Easter, Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and his supporters stormed into the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, where they performed prayers despite a ban on non-Muslim religious rituals there.

These incidents followed Israel's unprecedented closure of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for 40 days under the guise of "safety" during the United States-Israeli war on Iran. As a result, prayers at Al-Aqsa did not take place on Fridays or during Eid al-Fitr while Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and other religious figures were prevented from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Palm Sunday to lead services.

By now it is clear that Israel does not simply violate the Status Quo on occasion. Instead, it is actively trying to impose new rules – under which Muslim and Christian worship would be subject to full Israeli control. Despite what Israeli officials may claim, it is clear that Israeli control over Jerusalem would not guarantee "equality". Rather, it would normalise a profound disregard for the Palestinian people and their Muslim and Christian heritage.

In essence, the Israeli occupation considers Palestinian Christians and Muslims as "residents" rather than a people with ancient roots in the city and the right to self-determination. Their existence conflicts with the Zionist idea of Jerusalem being an exclusively Jewish city. Since the 16th century, religious life in Jerusalem has largely been regulated by the Status Quo agreement, articulated during the Ottoman period, which implies a set of historical rights and arrangements. Subsequently, the Status Quo was recognised in the Treaty of Paris (1856), which put an end to the Crimean War between the Russian and Ottoman empires, and the Berlin Treaty of 1878, which settled the loss of territory by the Ottomans in the Balkans.

The Status Quo was in force at the time the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917 and was respected during the British Mandate.

The sensitivity of the issue of the holy sites became clear when the United Nations voted on the partition of Palestine, designating Jerusalem and Bethlehem as a "corpus

separatum", an international status aimed at protecting the Status Quo. This arrangement included several elements, such as exempting church properties from taxation.

After the Nakba in 1948 when Zionist militias ethnically cleansed the western parts of Jerusalem, which particularly affected Christian Palestinians, Israel's admission to the UN was conditioned upon its commitment to respect, among other provisions, the UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which reaffirmed "existing rights" of worship. This commitment was also reaffirmed in Israel's agreement with France, known as the Chauvel-Fischer Agreement, in which Israel agreed to respect the Status Quo benefits for Christian sites under French protection in exchange for French recognition of its statehood.

The Status Quo is not ambiguous; it is a well-established system that cannot be unilaterally changed. In other words, the Israeli occupation either respects it or violates it. Clearly, the ongoing normalisation of Israel's



illegal annexation of Jerusalem – supported by initiatives such as the US recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital – aims to strengthen a Jewish-Zionist supremacist system over the city, including its holy sites.

Since 1967, Israel has rarely affirmed any commitment to the Status Quo. That is because doing so would reaffirm the ancient Palestinian Christian and Muslim identity of the city, as well as the historic role of countries such as France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Greece and Jordan in preserving it. Instead, it refers to "freedom of access" to holy sites, a concept that is not only systematically violated but also does not align with the Status Quo.

In fact, the Status Quo dictates, for example, that the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound is administered by the Islamic Waqf, which determines who may visit and when. However, Israel's "freedom of access" policy at Al-Aqsa has translated into thousands of armed settlers

entering the compound, conducting Jewish prayers and asserting claims over it as a Jewish prayer site.

Israel has proven it cannot be a guarantor of freedom of worship in the Holy Land not least because its policies do not reflect any concern for the rights of the Palestinian people. This is the same country that has carried out a genocide in Gaza – something that has been established by international human rights organisations and a UN commission of inquiry.

It is the same country that continues to occupy and move towards annexation of Palestinian land despite the International Court of Justice designating such activities illegal under international law. It is the same country that has discriminatory laws for its Palestinian citizens and Palestinians it occupies, amounting to apartheid, and that protects settlers who carry out terror attacks against an occupied population.

Even the Israeli policy of separating Jerusalem from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory is a clear sign Israel does not want to grant freedom of worship. Under this regime, Palestinians holding West Bank or Gaza IDs cannot access the city without Israeli permits, which are rarely granted.

This restriction affects not only ordinary worshippers and families but also clergy. In 2011, the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Suhail Dawani, had his residency permit revoked as a means of pressure. This year, Israeli forces detained Sheikh Mohammad al-Abassi, imam of Al-Aqsa Mosque, barring him from entering the compound for a week.

For Palestinian Muslims and Christians, prayer has become an act of resistance. Resiliently, peacefully and quietly, they continue to challenge Israeli attempts to erode the Status Quo, even if the rest of the world ignores their plight.

The Trump administration, a self-proclaimed defender of religious freedom, appointed a Christian Zionist ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, who largely shares the ideology of Israeli settlers. Meanwhile, the European Union, Israel's main trading partner, under European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas, has avoided taking meaningful accountability measures. At the same time, the "Abraham Accords" have proven politically ineffective, including in the very objective they were meant to address in front of Arab audiences: preventing Israeli annexation of occupied Palestinian territory.

# Seven ways America can win the ceasefire and end the war

John Feehery

It was too much to ask of United States Vice President JD Vance that he hammer out a peace agreement with representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the first direct meeting of the two sides in more than a decade.

But it is not too much to ask for enemy combatants to maintain the ceasefire and for negotiators to come back to the table for a second round of meetings. As of now, we still have a ceasefire. The question remains: Can America win it?

For President Donald Trump, this question is existential. If voters perceive that the US lost the war against Iran, the Republicans will lose Congress and the president would be on the political hot seat for his last two years in office. If, on the other hand, voters perceive that this conflict with Iran was worth it and life returns to normal by the summer, then the Republicans have a better chance of breaking even in November's midterm elections.

What would it take for the US to win the ceasefire and eventually get a peace agreement? Well, first, the Strait of Hormuz must be open to all shipping. This must be the number one objective for the Trump administration as it is the one thing that has the most impact on the global economy and, most importantly for a domestic audience, the price of oil. Policy planners at the White House didn't fully appreciate how Iran could seize control of this critical chokepoint in international commerce, but they appreciate it now.

Second, the US must increase domestic pressure on the Iranian regime. Stopping the bombing is a good way to do that. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has been significantly weakened by the joint US-Israeli attacks. Our intelligence community needs to do everything it can to strengthen the Iranian protest movement, arming them with weapons and resources. Bombing bridges and oil refineries would have been a significant blunder by the Americans because it would have made it much more difficult for insurgents within the country to mount any kind of opposition.

Third, the US must mend its relationships with its traditional allies. This isn't

just about Iran. Russia and China look at the tensions within NATO, and they rejoice. A more united Western world, especially when it comes to keeping the Strait of Hormuz open, is essential.

Fourth, the Trump administration needs to improve its messaging game. Right now, the US is thoroughly divided when it comes to this war. Even elements of Trump's political base are deeply sceptical of the campaign. I understand the motivation behind the president's maximalist rhetoric, but trying to convince your opponents that you are a madman who just might put his finger on the button comes with some downsides.



Our allies were frightened, the American people were concerned, the pope was aghast. Even some of the president's biggest political fans called for him to be removed via the 25th Amendment of the US Constitution, which provides for replacing a sitting president due to incapacity. Messaging from Secretary of War Pete Hegseth hasn't been much better. Calling this another Christian crusade is not helpful to our long-term goals in the region.

Fifth, the president needs to paint a picture of what peace would mean to the Iranian people and to the region in general and then sell it to them. What is happening with Venezuela is a perfect example of what could happen with Iran. We cut off the head of

government there, but the rest of the political body is still mostly in place. We do not need a total change in the regime. We do need a total change in the attitude of the current regime.

Sixth, the president needs to firmly lay out what we expect from a lasting peace agreement and what we need from the Iranian regime. The first thing we need is actual peace. Enough with funding terrorism, terrorist proxies and never-ending war against Israel. Peace means peace. The nuclear programme must never be turned into nuclear weapons.

Seventh, the president needs to make sure Israel's objectives are aligned with ours. This would require some blunt talk between

Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Clearly, the Israeli prime minister sold Trump a bill of goods when he told him that this would be a quick war that would topple the Iranian regime at a relatively low cost. That hasn't happened.

I appreciate how the Israelis are sick and tired of getting missiles sent their way from Hezbollah. But a forever war seems to be a key component of the Netanyahu political campaign, and that simply does not work for the American people any more.

The US and Israel need to be on the same page about what their objectives are now that we are in a lull in the fighting. This is critical to win this ceasefire.

## Karachi's aviation potential

The ongoing conflict in Iran has created unprecedented disruptions in the Middle East, with airspace closures, drone attacks and security concerns affecting major Gulf hubs. Several international airlines had to either suspend or reduce flights to traditional transit airports. As a result, international flight routes had to be altered, and new transit points were being sought. The situation, though unfortunate for global aviation, presents a rare opportunity for Pakistan, particularly Karachi, to position itself as an alternative regional transit and technical-stop hub.

Amid these disruptions, Karachi's Jinnah International has already been witnessing increased aviation activity. Several international flights have been diverted or have landed for refuelling or for technical reasons, temporarily turning Karachi into a regional diversion hub reminiscent of the situation during the 1990 Gulf crisis. At the same time, global airlines are increasingly using corridors through Pakistani airspace to avoid conflict zones, making these routes among the busiest in the region.

This shift has significant financial implications for Pakistan. Each aircraft that lands for refuelling, technical checks or crew changes generates revenue through landing charges, parking fees, navigation charges and fuel sales. For a wide-body aircraft, these charges can amount to tens of thousands of dollars per stop. If Karachi becomes a regular technical stop or transit hub for long-haul flights, the cumulative revenue could reach hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Additionally, increased aviation activity would boost business for ground handling companies, catering services, fuel suppliers, cargo handlers and airport retail operations.

However, for Pakistan to capitalise on this opportunity, several technical and administrative issues must be addressed urgently. Airport infrastructure must be upgraded to handle higher volumes of international traffic. Karachi's runway, taxiways and parking bays are capable of handling wide-body aircraft, but apron capacity and passenger processing facilities require modernisation.

Operational efficiency has to improve as well. Airlines value quick turnaround times, efficient air traffic control coordination and minimal bureaucratic delays. The relevant authorities should streamline all procedures. A dedicated fast-track facility for transit flights could strengthen Karachi's competitiveness. Security and reliability are equally important. International carriers must be assured that airport operations, safety standards and air traffic management meet global benchmarks. Strengthening the capabilities of Karachi's air traffic control systems and maintaining seamless co-ordi-

nation will be essential.

The government should adopt a proactive strategy of aviation diplomacy, like, say, engaging directly with major airlines and offering temporary incentives, such as reduced landing fee, discounted fuel or promotional transit packages. History shows that geopolitical crises often reshape global aviation routes. The Middle East conflict is not expected to end anytime soon even if the actual war is over. If Pakistan acts swiftly, Karachi, cashing in on its geographical location, can transform the current disruption into a strategic opportunity.

Pakistan must have agreements with major airlines to include Karachi as an alternative aerodrome in their plans. With targeted investment, efficient management and supportive policies, the metropolis could emerge as a viable alternative transit hub in South Asia, capturing a revenue stream that would otherwise flow elsewhere.

Naseem Khan  
Karachi

## The illusion of education reform

The claim that the government spends 1.5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) on education, and the demand that this must be raised to 5pc to meet international standards, feel hollow on the ground. Even the existing allocation is not honestly utilised. As a government school teacher, I witness daily how resources meant for students are quietly diverted or suppressed.

Many schools operate with only a handful of janitorial and support staff despite sanctioned funds for the purpose. Also, teaching posts remain vacant for several years, but the relevant authorities neither advertise these vacancies nor recruit replacements, just allowing salaries to lapse back into departmental pockets.

Ironically, English-language teachers are often required to teach Islamiyat, Pakistan Studies and even Computer Science to compensate for staffing gaps. Basic infrastructure tells the same story. Broken chairs, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of learning materials show that student welfare is the lowest priority. Students are often forced to clean their classrooms themselves, handling dirt with bare hands and sitting in soiled uniforms. They are also assigned duties to make up for the shortage of staff.

Students are the least considered stakeholders in this system. They are frequently overburdened with co-curricular activities aimed at winning medals and prizes, often at the expense of their core curriculum and studies. These awards frequently serve the school management more than the students as administrations use them to showcase 'achievements' and justify additional funds

from the treasury.

Increasing the budget in itself will not produce meaningful change. What is surely needed is transparency, merit-based recruitment and community oversight.

Rakhshanda Abbas  
Gilgit

## Plastic ban paradox

Despite the ban on polythene bags, nothing has changed on the ground. According to various environmental estimates, Pakistan uses around 55-60 billion plastic bags annually, with major urban cities, like Karachi, consuming millions of bags daily. A significant portion of this waste ends up in drains and the sea, worsening urban flooding and marine pollution. In the initial months of ban in June 2025, some supermarkets switched to eco-friendly bags, but charged high prices, placing an added burden on the public. Now, many have quietly returned to plastic bags. The authorities must enforce the ban effectively with proper checks and balances.

Kashif Shayari  
Karachi

## A high-tech shield against proxy attendance

The Sindh School Education and Literacy Department (SELD) deserves commendation for its recent initiative to introduce the Facial Recognition Attendance and Monitoring Evaluation System (Frames) in public schools. A persistent challenge undermining the credibility of school management is the practice of proxy attendance. Earlier efforts to introduce biometric attendance systems, though well-intentioned, did not succeed due to persistent loopholes. The new system, which relies on facial recognition technology, offers a more robust alternative by significantly reducing the possibility of impersonation or collusion. If implemented with due diligence, Frames has the potential to strengthen transparency, eliminate fraudulent attendance and reinforce accountability across the provincial education system.

Ali Hussain  
Karachi

## Potholes and pipelines

The link road from 4-K Chowrangi, North Karachi, to Hub River Road is completely damaged due to leaking water pipelines and heavy traffic, and needs immediate repairs. This road links up with the Northern Bypass, and thousands of students use it to reach their universities every day. The authorities concerned should look into the matter and address it immediately.

Khawaja Tajammul Hussain  
Karachi

## Western states face above-normal wildfire threats this summer

Tik Root

Every state in the West is expected to face an above-normal threat of wildfire this summer, according to the latest projections, released by the National Interagency Coordination Center.



The government-run center publishes monthly reports predicting fire risk for the four months ahead, and the change since the March outlook is staggering. The agency denotes elevated risk in red on its maps, and the June forecast from March 2 showed a small swath of rouge in the Southwest. But, citing an ongoing snow drought, rapid snowmelt, and a recent unprecedented heat wave, the latest maps feature red spilling across the Southwest and into the Rockies, Pacific Northwest, and northern California.

"We're probably not going to be in great shape this year," said Matthew Hurteau, director of the Center for Fire Resilient Ecosystems and Society at the University of New Mexico. While it's normal for the Southwest to experience a relatively early fire season, before the summer monsoons hit, what really stood out to him was how quickly the red moved north. "It's really early for that." June typically sees snow lingering in many mountain ranges and snowmelt wetting the landscape, he said. Not this year. The latest outlook reports that the snow melt-off in the Four Corners region came "not just several weeks or months earlier than normal, but also four to six weeks earlier than the previously recorded earliest melt-off dates." The recent heat wave also desiccated the West. Albuquerque, for example, recorded its earliest ever 90-degree reading on March 21, more than six weeks sooner than its previous earliest date, in 1947. The daily average of 73.1 degrees Las Vegas recorded in March would have broken the city's April record.

## Surprising reasons to get more sleep

Rachel Reiff Ellis

A lack of sleep at night can make you cranky the next day. And over time, skimping on sleep can mess up more than just your morning mood. Studies show getting quality sleep on a regular basis can help improve all sorts of issues, from your blood sugar to your workouts. Here's why you should give your body the ZZZs it needs. When you're running low on sleep, you'll probably have trouble holding onto and recalling details. That's because sleep plays a big part in both learning and memory. Without enough sleep, it's tough to focus and take in new information. Your brain also doesn't have enough time to properly store memories so you can pull them up later. Sleep lets your brain catch up so you're ready for what's next. Another thing that your brain does while you sleep is process your emotions. Your mind needs this time in order to recognize and react the right way. When you cut that short, you tend to have more negative emotional reactions and fewer positive ones. Chronic lack of sleep can also raise the chance of having a mood disorder. One large study showed that when you have insomnia, you're five times more likely to develop depression, and your odds of anxiety or panic disorders are even greater. Refreshing slumber helps you hit the reset button on a bad day, improve your outlook on life, and be better prepared to meet challenges. While you sleep, your blood pressure goes down, giving your heart and blood vessels a bit of a rest. The less sleep you get, the longer your blood pressure stays up during a 24-hour cycle. High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, including stroke.



## Yoga for depression and anxiety

Alexandra McCray

You know that exercise is good for you, but depression and anxiety can zap your energy and make it harder to get active. Yoga can be another way to work movement into your routine and feel better.



In general, yoga's benefits may include less stress, a lower heart rate, and lower blood pressure. Keep in mind that yoga doesn't replace other types of depression or anxiety treatment. Your doctor may suggest it and other types of exercise along with your treatment plan, which could include therapy and/or medication. Don't stop other treatments without consulting with your doctor, psychiatrist, or therapist.

Studies show that yoga also may help people who have depression, but its effect on anxiety disorders isn't clear. A review of studies found that people with a variety of mental health disorders who did "physically active" yoga for an average of 60 minutes, once or twice a week, for about 2.5 months had fewer depressive symptoms. Yoga styles were considered physically active if they had people moving for at least half of the class time and focused on specific body movements (asana), breathing (pranayama), and/or mindfulness (including meditation). Researchers still need to learn more about how yoga reduces depressive symptoms and if specific styles of yoga and poses work better than others. If you haven't exercised regularly in a while, you should be able to add light to moderate movement to your routine without talking to your doctor. If you're older than 50, have a medical condition, or are pregnant, check with your doctor before you start a new exercise routine.

## The moon is green and brown?

Elizabeth Howell

The four Artemis II astronauts have returned to Earth — delivering not only themselves but also a precious trove of images from their lunar journey. And the geologists supporting the mission can hardly wait to dive in.



"The images are spectacular, absolutely," Gordon Osinski, a crater specialist and planetary geologist at Canada's Western University who has been deeply involved in the Artemis II crew's geology training, told Live Science after seeing the first photos of the crew's seven-hour lunar flyby.

Osinski said that the small batch of images transmitted to Earth so far hint at big discoveries about the moon's geology — and could help shape the hunt for lunar samples in NASA's upcoming crewed moon landings, starting with Artemis IV as soon as 2028. Two geological findings stand out so far. One of these is impact flashes — brief but bright flashes of light from when space rocks slam into the moon, leaving craters behind. Artemis II astronauts Reid Wiseman and Jeremy Hanson reported seeing at least five of these flashes during their lunar flyby. Geologists hope to review the crew's images, once they return to Earth, to potentially identify the craters associated with the impacts. "The conditions that [the crew] had to view those was perfect," Osinski said, referring to the crew's passage over the lunar terminator — the stark dividing line between the moon's bright day-side and dark night-side, where contrast is heightened and flashes are easier to spot.



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