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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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# Global economic uncertainty, formidable challenges for Pakistan

Farhan Khan

According to the Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Pakistan is expected to sustain its economic momentum in the medium term, with real gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast at 3.5% in FY2026, up from 3.1% in FY2025, as manufacturing activity gradually recovers and investment begins to pick up. This projection reflects cautious optimism about the country's macroeconomic trajectory following a period of stabilization.

To quote the Asian Development Bank Country Director, "Pakistan's economy has stabilized and begun to show stronger momentum, supported by progress in implementing key economic reforms amid a challenging global environment. Growth is expected to continue in 2026 and 2027, but downside risks are significant. Sustained reform efforts are critical to preserve the growth momentum and bolster fiscal and external buffers against global shocks."

However, inflationary pressures are expected to persist. It is projected that average inflation will rise to 6.4% in FY2026 and further to 6.5% in FY2027, primarily due to surging global oil prices and disrupted trade routes linked to ongoing tensions in the Middle East. Given that oil and gas constitute a substantial share of Pakistan's import bill, any sustained increase in energy prices is likely to exert considerable pressure on domestic prices. A prolonged Middle East conflict could significantly affect Pakistan's economic outlook by slowing growth through higher energy and fertilizer costs, weakening both agricultural and industrial output, reducing remittance inflows, and widening the current account deficit.

In FY2026, a rebound in private-sector investment is anticipated, driven by recent progress on reform measures and relative stability in the foreign exchange market. Effective implementation of the reform program is expected to foster a more stable macroeconomic environment and gradually remove structural barriers to growth. Economic activity in both the industrial and services sectors is likely to benefit from monetary easing, while construction activity is expected to gain momentum due to fiscal incentives introduced in the FY2026 budget, alongside ongoing post-flood reconstruction efforts.

Despite these positive indicators, Pakistan continues to face significant challenges arising from global economic uncertainty, which could lead to heightened inflationary, fiscal, and external account pressures. The reported recall of \$3.5 billion in deposits by the United Arab

Emirates, along with the impending repayment of a \$1.3 billion Eurobond, has created immediate pressure on Pakistan's external buffers that had been painstakingly rebuilt over the past three years. In response, Saudi Arabia extended support through a commitment of \$3 billion in additional deposits to help Pakistan maintain its foreign exchange reserves and avert a fresh external financing crisis. However, this assistance also implies that the existing \$5 billion deposit would no longer remain subject to the earlier rollover arrangement, effectively raising Pakistan's liabilities to Riyadh to \$8 billion.

It is pertinent to note that when the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) was established, it aimed to attract up to \$100 billion in investment from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, but progress toward this ambitious target has remained limited. Recent developments have also exposed the fragility of IMF-supported stabilization efforts. Pakistan recorded a primary fiscal surplus of 1.3% of GDP in FY2025, with a cumulative primary adjust-



ment of 5.6% of GDP since 2022—the largest in its history. However, this consolidation has largely been achieved through heavy taxation and burdensome energy pricing policies, effectively placing the adjustment burden on existing taxpayers and ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, government expenditure has continued to rise, with non-interest spending increasing by 25% in FY2025. Recent hikes in salaries and benefits for ministers, legislators, judges, and bureaucrats, alongside visible public consumption, stand in stark contrast to official claims of austerity.

Excessively high real interest rates, combined with elevated energy costs, have eroded business competitiveness, discouraged investment, and caused exports to stagnate. Pakistan recorded its first current account surplus in 14 years in FY2025; however, this achievement was largely driven by stringent foreign exchange controls that compelled many foreign firms to exit the market. The underlying vulnerabilities remain evident in the composition of the State Bank of Pakistan reserves, which stand at \$16.3 billion, of which \$12.7 billion consists of deposits from "friendly" countries—funds that are

subject to periodic rollover and therefore cannot be considered fully stable.

At the same time, public debt rose to 70.8% of GDP in FY2025, up from 67.7% in FY2024, primarily driven by rising interest payments. Pakistan faces an estimated \$89 billion in debt amortization between FY2026 and FY2030—averaging nearly \$18 billion annually. Interest payments alone have surged to 7.8% of GDP and now consume nearly three-quarters of Federal Board of Revenue revenues. The \$7 billion loan program from the International Monetary Fund is barely sufficient to cover the \$6.78 billion Pakistan owes to the Fund over the same period, effectively meaning that the country is borrowing to repay existing debt obligations. While such arrangements may help avert default in the short term, they have done little to address deep-rooted structural weaknesses and have, instead, reinforced economic dependency.

According to independent experts, Pakistan is burdened with dysfunctional institutions that struggle to enforce the rule of law or safeguard public resources effectively. The country's economic crisis is often attributed to "state capture," whereby policymaking disproportionately benefits a narrow segment of political and business elites. Without meaningful efforts to dismantle entrenched privileges and promote inclusive governance, economic stagnation is likely to persist.

Pakistan's economic challenges are fundamentally rooted in weak governance and declining institutional quality. Decades of economic mismanagement have resulted in a substantial waste of public resources. Between 2000 and 2025, Pakistan's average tax-to-GDP ratio remained around 9%. Had the country achieved even a modest 15%—which is still on the lower end for comparable economies—it could have generated an additional Rs45 trillion in revenue. Persistent inefficiencies in the energy sector have driven circular debt beyond Rs5 trillion, while poorly managed state-owned enterprises (SOEs) continue to incur annual losses of approximately Rs900 billion.

Without comprehensive structural reforms, a significant increase in exports, and strict fiscal discipline—including a substantial reduction in the size of government and the elimination of state-sponsored luxuries—Pakistan is likely to remain trapped in a cycle of low investment and stagnant growth. The long-term solution lies not in accumulating more foreign loans, but in putting its own economic house in order through sustainable and inclusive policy reforms.

# Pakistan's dexterous handling of US-Iran peace process

Nasim Ahmed

The peace dialogue between the United States and Iran has reached an impasse. With the departure of the Iranian delegation and the cancellation of the American mission, the so-called "40-Day War" has now entered a more uncertain and volatile phase marked by a growing diplomatic vacuum. As the two-week ceasefire approached its expiration, the central question shifted from who had prevailed in the conflict to which side would blink first in the escalating economic and political confrontation that has followed.

The collapse of the negotiations is rooted in a fundamental clash of entrenched "red lines." Washington, emboldened by the scale of damage inflicted during Operation Epic Fury, has moved beyond seeking a restoration of the previous status quo and is now pressing for what amounts to complete Iranian capitulation. According to analysts, the administration of Donald Trump has embraced what is being described as a "Vanquished Foe" doctrine. Under this framework, the United States is demanding not only a halt to nuclear activity but also the physical removal of all remaining centrifuges and enriched uranium from Iranian territory. In addition, Washington is insisting on the establishment of a "Strategic Neutralization Zone"—a permanent 50-mile demilitarized corridor along Iran's coastline on the Persian Gulf.

Tehran, however, has adopted a posture of calculated defiance. The new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, appears to have framed the ceasefire as merely a "tactical pause" designed to allow the country to regroup and reassess its strategic position. Iran's latest stance rejects any dismantling of its domestic nuclear infrastructure, offering instead a "monitored pause" in uranium enrichment in exchange for the immediate unfreezing of approximately \$120 billion in overseas assets. "We negotiated for peace, but we will not negotiate for our disappearance," Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated before departing for Muscat, underlining Tehran's uncompromising position.

While active hostilities have subsided for the moment, the economic dimension of the conflict has intensified significantly. The failure of the second round of negotiations sent shockwaves through global energy markets. In the aftermath of the postponed Islamabad talks, Brent crude prices surged to \$124 per barrel, effectively acting as a global economic burden. Meanwhile, the United

States Navy has intensified its "clearing operations" in the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz, supported by what is effectively a maritime blockade. In response, Iran has signaled that it may deploy mobile coastal defense systems to target oil tankers if its own exports continue to be restricted to near zero levels.

The international response has been marked by growing frustration and concern. China and India, the world's two largest oil importers, have criticized Washington's "maximalist demands," describing them as a major obstacle to global stability. Across European Union member states, inflation has surged to an alarming 9.2%, with industrial hubs in Germany reporting a "catastrophic" increase in energy costs—raising fears that the ongoing economic slowdown in 2026 could spiral into a deeper and more prolonged recession.



The prospects for maintaining the current ceasefire appear increasingly fragile. Military analysts warn that both sides are using this temporary lull to reposition and reinforce their strategic assets. Satellite imagery reportedly shows elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) relocating surviving ballistic missile units into the Zagros Mountains, while the United States has strengthened its "Steel Ring" of carrier strike groups in the Arabian Sea, signaling preparedness for a potential escalation.

The so-called Islamabad Channel failed to produce meaningful progress largely because neither side believes it has exhausted its leverage. Washington appears convinced that the Iranian regime is approaching a point of internal fragility, while Tehran calculates that mounting global economic pressure will eventually force Western powers to soften their stance. This mutual miscalculation continues to widen the diplomatic divide.

What, then, are the prospects for a comprehensive settlement? Most diplomats remain deeply skeptical. Any lasting agreement would require a degree of trust that

the 40-Day War has effectively destroyed. In this context, the most likely scenario is not a formal peace treaty but rather a prolonged "frozen conflict"—a state of sustained high tension characterized by sporadic skirmishes, cyber warfare, and ongoing disruptions to global supply chains. If a second round of negotiations fails to materialize in the near term, the current "Pyrrhic peace" may collapse as abruptly as it emerged, leaving the world anxiously watching for renewed conflict while bearing the economic consequences of a geopolitical stalemate with no clear resolution.

In an effort to break this deadlock, Pakistan has stepped into an active "shuttle diplomacy" role aimed at preventing the ceasefire from unraveling into full-scale war. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff Asim Munir, Pakistan is pursuing a dual-track strategy.

On the political front, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held an urgent telephone conversation with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, urging Tehran to uphold the ceasefire despite the US withdrawal from negotiations. Simultaneously, on the security front, Field Marshal Asim Munir has been engaged in intensive behind-the-scenes discussions, reportedly leveraging Pakistan's unique military-to-military ties with Iran as well as its longstanding strategic relationship with the Pentagon to explore possible de-escalation mechanisms, particularly regarding the naval standoff in the Strait of Hormuz.

Pakistan is also advancing a broader multilateral approach to apply coordinated pressure on both Washington and Tehran. At the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, Pakistani officials engaged with counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar to explore the creation of a regional security framework capable of providing guarantees for any future agreement—particularly in relation to energy security and the reopening of critical maritime trade routes. Additionally, Pakistan is working closely with Oman to ensure that even if the Islamabad Channel remains suspended, discreet "backchannel" communications between the two adversaries can continue uninterrupted.

In a rapidly evolving and highly volatile geopolitical landscape, Pakistan's diplomatic initiative may prove crucial in preventing a further escalation. However, without a fundamental shift in the positions of the United States and Iran, the path toward lasting peace remains uncertain and fraught with risk.

# Unrealistic cotton targets

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's agricultural sector is once again confronting a widening gap between policy ambition and on-ground reality, with the cotton crop at the centre of this disconnect. A recent warning by the Pakistan Cotton Ginners' Association has reignited concerns about the credibility of official production targets, exposing structural weaknesses that continue to undermine one of the country's most vital cash crops.

The controversy stems from the latest projections issued by the Federal Committee on Agriculture, which has set a cotton production target of 9.6 million bales for the 2026–27 season. At first glance, the figure appears ambitious but achievable. However, when placed against recent performance, it raises serious questions. The outgoing season closed at just 5.6 million bales—barely over half of the earlier target of 10.2 million bales—marking yet another significant shortfall in a long series of missed benchmarks.

This pattern is not new. Over the past several years, including the 2022–23, 2023–24 and 2024–25 seasons, cotton production has consistently fallen short of official estimates, often hitting historic lows. Such repeated discrepancies point to a deeper issue within Pakistan's agricultural planning framework: targets that are formulated without sufficient grounding in empirical data or realistic assessments of field conditions.

Industry stakeholders argue that these inflated projections are not merely statistical errors but have tangible consequences across the cotton value chain. When production estimates are overstated, they distort decision-making for importers, exporters and textile manufacturers. Businesses rely on accurate forecasts to plan procurement, manage inventories and determine pricing strategies. Inaccurate data introduces uncertainty, complicating these calculations and potentially leading to supply mismatches or financial losses.

A major concern highlighted by the PCGA is the lack of modern, data-driven methodologies in setting production targets. Unlike global best practices, which incorporate satellite imagery, real-time crop monitoring and extensive stakeholder consultations, Pakistan's approach often relies on outdated or incomplete information. This not only weakens the credibility of official projections but also undermines confidence among market participants.

More critically, there appears to be no clear roadmap explaining how the country

intends to bridge the nearly four-million-bale gap between current output and the newly announced target. Such a sharp increase would require significant improvements in productivity, input quality and resource management—none of which can be achieved overnight. Yet, the structural constraints that have long plagued the cotton sector remain largely unaddressed.

Among these challenges, stagnant yields stand out as a persistent issue. Farmers continue to struggle with poor-quality seed, limited access to advanced farming technologies and inadequate extension services. The widespread use of substandard Bt cotton varieties has further compromised both yield and fibre quality, reducing the competitiveness of Pakistan's cotton in international markets.

Mechanisation is another area where progress has been slow. Cotton picking in Pakistan is still predominantly manual, a practice that not only increases labour costs but also affects efficiency and product quality.



Manual harvesting often leads to higher contamination levels, which in turn reduces the value of the crop for textile manufacturers. In contrast, countries that have adopted mechanised harvesting techniques have seen significant gains in both productivity and quality.

Efforts to address some of these issues have been initiated, but their impact remains limited. For instance, the government has recently allowed the import of cottonseed after decades of restrictions, aiming to reduce reliance on inferior local varieties. However, procedural delays have meant that these imports are arriving too late to influence the current sowing cycle. Moreover, strict regulatory requirements mandate multi-year trials before commercial approval can be granted, delaying any meaningful benefits for farmers.

Perhaps the most significant and contentious factor contributing to the decline of cotton is the expansion of sugarcane cultivation. Over the years, sugarcane—a water-intensive crop—has steadily encroached upon

traditional cotton-growing areas. Driven by short-term financial incentives and strong political backing, sugarcane has diverted both land and water resources away from cotton, disrupting the balance of Pakistan's agricultural economy.

This shift is particularly troubling given the country's existing surplus of sugar, estimated at around 1.5 million tonnes. Despite this surplus, plans are underway to establish new sugar mills in regions such as southern Punjab, further incentivising sugarcane cultivation at the expense of cotton. Areas like Rahim Yar Khan, once considered a cotton stronghold with production levels reaching up to 1.8 million bales annually, have witnessed a steady decline as farmers switch to more lucrative alternatives.

The PCGA has raised alarms over this trend, even appealing to top state authorities to halt the establishment of new sugar mills in key cotton-producing regions. However, the outcome of these appeals remains uncertain, given the significant influence wielded by the sugar industry within Pakistan's political and economic landscape.

The decline of cotton production over the past two decades tells a sobering story. From peak levels of 14 to 15 million bales annually, output has now dwindled to barely five to six million bales. It reflects not just adverse weather conditions or market fluctuations, but a prolonged period of policy neglect and institutional inertia.

Reversing this trend will require more than ambitious targets. It demands a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that addresses the root causes of decline. Key measures could include the introduction of enforceable crop zoning laws to protect cotton-growing areas, investment in high-quality seed development, expansion of mechanisation and improved water management practices. Equally important is the need for transparent, data-driven planning processes that involve all relevant stakeholders.

In conclusion, Pakistan's cotton sector stands at a critical crossroads. While official targets continue to project optimism, the realities on the ground tell a different story—one of declining yields, shifting crop patterns and systemic inefficiencies. Without meaningful reforms and a commitment to evidence-based policymaking, target-setting risks becoming little more than an exercise in wishful thinking. Restoring credibility to agricultural planning will not only be essential for reviving cotton production but also for safeguarding the broader economic interests tied to this strategically vital crop.

# Pakistan among world's worst hunger hotspots

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan has once again been ranked among the world's most food-insecure nations, with millions struggling to access basic nutrition amid intensifying climate shocks and persistent economic challenges. A new United Nations-backed assessment has placed the country among the top ten global hotspots of acute food insecurity, underscoring the scale and complexity of a crisis that continues to evolve rather than recede.

The Global Report on Food Crises 2026 paints a sobering picture. Pakistan joins a list of countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Sudan, and Yemen where hunger is most severe and widespread. These nations collectively represent the epicentre of global food crises, where conflict, climate extremes, and economic instability intersect to threaten millions of lives.

According to the report, Pakistan faced one of the largest food crises in 2025, with approximately 11 million people experiencing acute food insecurity. Of these, around 9.3 million were classified under “crisis” conditions, while another 1.7 million were in “emergency” — the two most severe stages before famine. These classifications are based on the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a globally recognised framework used to assess the severity of hunger. Under this system, a “crisis” level signals the urgent need for intervention to protect livelihoods, while “emergency” conditions indicate a direct threat to survival.

The drivers of food insecurity in Pakistan are both structural and cyclical. Chief among them is the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters. The report highlights how heavy monsoon rains and flash floods during 2025 affected more than six million people across the country. These events destroyed crops, damaged infrastructure, and disrupted local economies, leaving vulnerable communities with diminished access to food and income.

Such climate shocks have become a recurring feature in Pakistan's recent history, compounding existing vulnerabilities in the agricultural sector. With large segments of the population dependent on farming for their livelihoods, even localized crop losses can have cascading effects on food availability and affordability. Rural communities, particularly in provinces like Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, remain especially exposed to these risks. Nutrition indicators further illustrate the depth of the challenge. While the report identifies several Pakistani regions as areas of concern, it also notes

a critical gap: the absence of sufficient, up-to-date data to assign a formal severity classification for malnutrition in 2025. As a result, Pakistan is grouped among countries with “no severity data” for nutrition outcomes. However, this does not imply an absence of risk. On the contrary, the country is included in broader assessments of malnutrition pathways, reflecting persistent issues related to inadequate diets, limited health-care access, poor sanitation, and disease burden.

Another dimension of Pakistan's food security challenge lies in its role within regional displacement dynamics. The country continues to host a significant number of refugees, particularly from neighbouring Afghanistan. This adds further pressure on already strained resources, especially in areas where local populations are themselves facing food insecurity.

Economic conditions have also played a critical role in shaping the crisis. Although inflation is projected to rise modestly to around six percent in 2026, even this level of price pressure can significantly impact low-income households. Food inflation, in particular, tends to disproportionately affect the poorest segments of society, reducing their ability to meet basic nutritional needs.

Despite these challenges, the report notes some modest improvements in Pakistan's situation during 2025. The number of people in the most severe categories of food insecurity declined compared to the previous year. Approximately 400,000 fewer individuals were classified in “crisis,” while more than 500,000 fewer were in “emergency” conditions. These gains suggest that targeted interventions and favourable conditions in certain areas may have had a positive impact.

However, the report cautions that these improvements remain fragile. Worsening climate patterns, economic uncertainty, and structural weaknesses could easily reverse recent progress. Moreover, the apparent increase in the number of food-insecure people over recent years must be interpreted with care. Much of this rise is attributed to expanded data coverage rather than a purely deteriorating situation.

In 2020, food security assessments in Pakistan covered only about two percent of the population. By 2025, this figure had risen to 21 percent, encompassing 68 districts across key provinces. This expansion added more than 14 million people to the dataset, providing a more comprehensive picture of the country's food security landscape. While this improved coverage enhances understanding, it also complicates direct comparisons over time.

Globally, the outlook for food security remains deeply concerning. The report describes the situation in 2026 as “bleak,” with conflict, climate change, and declining humanitarian assistance expected to keep hunger at critical levels. In 2025 alone, an estimated 266 million people across 47 countries faced high levels of acute food insecurity — nearly double the proportion recorded in 2016. Conflict continues to be the single largest driver of hunger worldwide, but climate extremes are playing an increasingly significant role. For the first time in the report's history, famine was confirmed in two separate contexts within the same year, highlighting the severity of the global crisis. Meanwhile, 1.4 million people were found to be living in catastrophic conditions across several countries, including Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen.

Children remain among the most vulnerable victims of this crisis. In 2025, an estimated 35.5 million children worldwide suffered from acute malnutrition, with nearly 10 million experiencing its most severe form. These figures underscore the long-term human cost of food insecurity, which extends far beyond immediate hunger to include impaired development, increased disease risk, and reduced life prospects.

Looking ahead, the report offers little optimism for a rapid improvement. While some countries, such as Bangladesh and Syria, have shown signs of progress, these gains are largely offset by worsening conditions elsewhere, including Afghanistan and parts of Africa. The persistence of overlapping crises suggests that food insecurity is no longer driven by isolated shocks but by sustained and interconnected pressures.

For Pakistan, this means that addressing food insecurity will require more than short-term relief measures. Long-term strategies must focus on building climate resilience, strengthening agricultural systems, improving data collection, and ensuring equitable access to resources. Without such comprehensive efforts, the country risks remaining trapped in a cycle of vulnerability.

In conclusion, Pakistan's inclusion among the world's most food-insecure nations reflects both the severity of current conditions and the structural challenges that continue to hinder progress. While some improvements have been recorded, they are overshadowed by the scale of need and the fragility of recent gains. As climate and economic pressures intensify, the urgency of coordinated and sustained action has never been greater — not only to address immediate hunger but to secure a more stable and food-secure future.

# Pakistan's structural reforms remain elusive

Shahid Hussain

As Pakistan passes through yet another phase of its economic stabilization programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the issue of tax reform has once again taken center stage. Under the ongoing \$7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF), the international lender has emphasized the urgent need for the government to expand its narrow tax base—a long-standing structural weakness that continues to undermine fiscal sustainability. While recent developments suggest some progress, deeper concerns persist regarding implementation gaps, policy duplication, and the overall direction of reform efforts.

The IMF's position comes in the context of the third review of the programme, for which a staff-level agreement was reached on March 27, 2026. However, the absence of a scheduled Executive Board meeting indicates that certain prior conditions may still need to be fulfilled before the next tranche is approved. Among these conditions, improving revenue mobilization appears to be a key priority. The IMF has signaled that while initial steps have been taken, much more needs to be done to ensure a durable and equitable tax system.

According to the IMF's assessment, Pakistan's revenue authorities—particularly the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR)—have initiated reforms under a broader transformation plan. These include strengthening audit mechanisms, expanding the use of digital invoicing, introducing production monitoring systems, and improving internal governance structures. Additionally, the establishment of a Tax Policy Office is intended to guide medium-term reforms aimed at ensuring consistency and neutrality in taxation policies.

Despite these initiatives, the ground realities present a more complex picture. During the first nine months of the current fiscal year (July–March 2026), the FBR recorded a tax collection shortfall of Rs610 billion, even after a downward revision of the original target. This gap is expected to widen further in the remaining months, partly due to external shocks such as the ongoing Middle East conflict, which has disrupted economic activity and, consequently, tax collection. Reduced industrial output, declining imports, and weakened consumer demand have all contributed to lower-than-expected revenues.

At the same time, tensions between the

tax authorities and the corporate sector have intensified. The Pakistan Business Council has raised concerns over what it describes as “illegal” notices issued by the FBR for the recovery of default surcharges on the super tax. Businesses argue that these demands are unjustified, particularly in cases where payments were delayed due to court orders rather than non-compliance. Compounding the issue is the persistent backlog of tax refunds, including sales and income tax, which in some cases have remained unpaid for years. This has placed additional strain on businesses already grappling with a challenging economic environment.

Another area of concern relates to the formulation of tax policy itself. While the newly created Tax Policy Office is tasked with developing a comprehensive reform strategy,



critics argue that this effort risks duplicating existing work. Over the years, numerous studies and policy papers—produced by both domestic experts and international institutions—have outlined detailed recommendations for tax reform across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons. These include proposals to simplify the tax code, reduce exemptions, improve compliance, and broaden the tax net.

One notable example is the work of the National Tax Reform Commission, whose recommendations received widespread endorsement but have yet to be implemented. Given this context, questions arise as to why new frameworks are being developed instead of building upon existing, well-researched proposals. The IMF itself has previously expressed a preference for avoiding duplication of efforts among multilateral partners, making its current approach somewhat difficult to reconcile with past positions.

Fiscal coordination between the federal and provincial governments also remains a critical challenge. Provinces are expected to

contribute to the federal fiscal framework in two main ways: by generating budget surpluses and by enhancing their own revenue collection, particularly through agricultural income tax. However, in practice, these contributions have often fallen short. Provincial budgets frequently project surpluses that are not realized by the end of the fiscal year, creating discrepancies that complicate overall fiscal planning.

Moreover, despite a consensus among provinces to strengthen agricultural income taxation—a key area with significant untapped potential—actual collections have remained disappointingly low. This highlights the broader issue of uneven tax burden distribution, where certain sectors continue to remain undertaxed while others face increasing pressure.

In this context, the government's reliance on indirect taxation and withholding taxes has drawn criticism. Such measures are often seen as “low-hanging fruit” because they are easier to implement and generate immediate revenue. However, they tend to disproportionately affect lower-income groups, exacerbating inequality and reducing overall economic efficiency. By contrast, meaningful reform would require bringing more individuals and sectors into the tax net, particularly those that have historically remained outside it.

Looking ahead, the role of the Finance Division will be crucial in shaping the upcoming federal budget. Beyond revenue measures, there is a growing consensus that expenditure rationalization must also be part of the solution. Reducing current expenditures—potentially by as much as Rs2 trillion—could help ease the pressure to raise additional taxes. This, in turn, would support economic activity by lowering the cost burden on businesses and households, with positive implications for investment and employment.

In conclusion, Pakistan's ongoing engagement with the IMF underscores the urgency of comprehensive tax reform. While incremental steps have been taken, the challenges remain deeply entrenched. Expanding the tax base, improving compliance, ensuring fairness, and enhancing coordination across different levels of government are all essential components of a sustainable fiscal strategy. Without a clear commitment to implementing long-standing recommendations and addressing structural weaknesses, the country risks repeating a cycle of short-term fixes and recurring fiscal crises.

# Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Resource wealth amid persistent crisis

Raza Khan

Although the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan has been endowed with several key resources and immense potential, it has unfortunately been facing crisis after crisis for many decades, a situation that has made the life of an ordinary resident extremely difficult—if one avoids describing it as ‘unlivable.’

As far as the province’s resource richness and potential are concerned, KP possesses significant deposits of natural gas, well-known reserves of crude oil, and massive hydroelectric power capacity. In addition, it is home to a large portion of Pakistan’s forests and identifiable mineral resources, including rare earth elements (REE). The province is also blessed with fertile agricultural land in the Peshawar Valley as well as in the southern regions, particularly in the Dera Ismail Khan division, along with countless scenic tourist attractions.

Nevertheless, despite these advantages, the province has a very thin industrial base and, consequently, underdeveloped urban infrastructure. This is particularly striking given that KP is one of the most densely populated provinces of the country, with one of the smallest land areas among Pakistan’s provinces and a population of approximately 40.8 million, mostly Pakhtuns, accounting for nearly 17 percent of Pakistan’s total population.

Various factors can be cited to explain the inability of KP to achieve even average levels of economic and social development, as well as political stability. These include deeply rooted ultra-conservative tribal structures and the near indifference of the state toward ensuring the province’s sustained development. Instead, the province and its resources have often been utilized for foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to neighboring Afghanistan. This policy approach necessitated hosting more than five million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the majority of whom were settled in KP. Furthermore, the perceived lack of industrial work culture and sustained economic productivity has also been a contributing factor to the recurring crises faced by the province over the past several decades. The resulting large-scale poverty and unemployment have further aggravated the situation. This has included continuous waves of violent terrorism by groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), contributing to a persistent and worsening security environment in KP.

Traditional political parties in the province, particularly the Awami National Party (ANP), Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Pakistan

People’s Party (PPP), and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which ruled the province multiple times—and in the case of PPP and PML-N, also governed at the federal level as major coalition partners from the 1970s to 2013—failed to adequately address the key issues facing the province. Their inability to bring about meaningful change further worsened the situation. As a result, the inhabitants of the province, who had consistently voted for parties with diverse ideological orientations—from the ethno-nationalist ANP to the Pakistani nationalist PML-N—in hopes of resolving their socioeconomic problems, became increasingly disillusioned.

Consequently, they began to rally behind the politically untested Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan. A fundamental reason for this shift was PTI’s stance on the issue of US drone (unmanned aerial vehicle) attacks in the adjoining Pakhtun tribal areas of KP, as well as its position on tackling terrorism in the province. The party secured a majority in the KP Provincial Assembly in the 2013 general elections and formed a coalition government with Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Qaumi Watan Party (QWP), led by former Chief Minister Aftab Ahmad Sherpao. Despite internal challenges, the PTI-led government under Chief Minister Pervez Khattak initiated several major development projects, including the Peshawar Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system and the Swat-Malakand Expressway, in addition to launching its flagship Sehat Insaf Card initiative. These efforts raised hopes among the people that the province had finally embarked on a path toward development and stability.

Unfortunately, this optimism did not fully materialize. The PTI has remained in power in the province since 2013, aside from brief caretaker setups during election periods. The people of KP continued to support the party in the hope that it would build upon its initial development projects and implement an effective counterterrorism strategy to ensure lasting peace. However, over nearly 12 years of PTI rule, the situation has gradually deteriorated. Today, serious security and law and order challenges persist across the province. In particular, the western and southern regions—from Kohat division to Dera Ismail Khan division, bordering Punjab and Balochistan—are facing alarming security conditions. Residents in districts such as D.I. Khan, Tank, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, Karak, and Kohat often struggle to carry out daily activities due to the strong presence of militants and terrorists. Attacks on security forces in these areas have become frequent, resulting in significant loss of life.

Similarly, the situation in the former

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now referred to as the Merged Tribal Districts (MTDs) following their integration into KP through the 25th Constitutional Amendment in 2018, remains deeply concerning. Civic conditions, infrastructure, and access to health and educational facilities in these areas are severely inadequate. Conditions are not much better even in the settled districts, including the provincial capital Peshawar and relatively developed areas such as Abbottabad.

The PTI governments under successive chief ministers—Mahmud Khan, Ali Amin Gandapur, and the incumbent leadership—have, by and large, struggled to ensure effective governance in the province. Several examples highlight these shortcomings. Access to healthcare under the Sehat Insaf Card scheme has reportedly been restricted in practice. Road infrastructure across the province is in poor condition, and the state of public schools has not significantly improved despite repeated policy claims. Most notably, the government’s lack of attention to higher education is evident in its inability to address the financial crisis at the University of Peshawar, where employees have been protesting due to unpaid salaries.

Amid this situation, the federal government has criticized the PTI-led provincial administration for failing to govern effectively and for prioritizing political objectives—such as efforts related to its jailed founder, Imran Khan—over the pressing needs of the people. There is some merit to this argument. On the other hand, the PTI-led provincial government attributes governance challenges to the federal government’s failure to transfer due financial resources. In particular, the non-payment of the promised additional 3 percent share under the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, following the merger of FATA in 2018, is cited as a constitutional violation. This position also carries considerable weight.

However, the greatest sufferers in this ongoing blame game are neither the federal nor the provincial authorities, but the people of KP. These resilient men and women, who have endured decades of hardship and made significant sacrifices for the country, deserve far better living conditions and governance. If the current trajectory continues, the province risks facing an even more severe crisis in the near future. Therefore, it is imperative for both the federal government and the PTI leadership in KP to reassess their policies, bridge their differences, and work collaboratively to restore stability and make the province livable once again.

# Free education: Article 25-A on trial in Punjab

Rasheed Ali

In the constitutional architecture of Pakistan, few provisions carry the moral and legal weight of Article 25-A — a clause that promises free and compulsory education to every child between the ages of five and sixteen. Modified through the landmark Eighteenth Amendment, this provision transformed education from a policy aspiration into a justiciable fundamental right. Yet, more than a decade later, the promise of universal education appears entangled in a growing policy paradox in Punjab.

At the centre of this unfolding debate is the provincial government, led by Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif, whose administration has embarked on an ambitious restructuring of the public school system. Framed officially as the Public Schools Reorganisation Programme (PSRP), the initiative seeks to outsource thousands of so-called underperforming public schools to private operators through the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF).

The scale of this transition is striking. By late 2024, approximately 5,863 public schools had already been handed over to private entities in the first phase, with plans to extend the process to over 13,000 institutions in total. In Rawalpindi district alone, 323 schools were transferred during the initial rollout. The government maintains that the objective is straightforward: improve quality, enhance accountability, and address chronic inefficiencies that have long plagued public sector education.

However, critics argue that the policy's implications run far deeper than administrative reform. For them, the outsourcing drive represents a structural retreat from the state's constitutional obligation under Article 25-A. By shifting operational control to private actors — even under subsidised frameworks — they contend that the government risks diluting its direct responsibility to ensure free education.

To understand the gravity of the concern, one must revisit the constitutional evolution of the right to education in Pakistan. Before 2010, education fell under Article 37(b) — a non-binding Principle of Policy that was subject to resource availability. The Eighteenth Amendment altered that status fundamentally, embedding education within the realm of enforceable rights. In legal terms, this shift meant

that the state could now be held accountable in courts for failing to provide free and compulsory schooling.

Yet, implementation has always been delegated to provinces, which are tasked with enacting laws and frameworks to fulfil this mandate. Punjab, being the country's most populous province, carries a disproportionate share of this responsibility. The question now confronting policymakers, educators, and legal experts alike is whether outsourcing aligns with — or undermines — that obligation.

Government officials defend the PSRP as a pragmatic response to systemic failure. Many of the schools targeted for outsourcing reportedly suffered from low enrolment, poor infrastructure, and chronic teacher absenteeism. By partnering with private operators, authorities argue, these institutions can be revitalised without imposing additional fiscal burdens on the state. Subsidies provided through PEF, they

educational avenue for low-income families. Any perceived or real increase in costs, even in ancillary services such as uniforms, transport, or learning materials, can disproportionately affect marginalised communities. In this context, critics contend that outsourcing risks widening educational inequality rather than narrowing it.

Legal analysts, meanwhile, point to the enforceability of Article 25-A as a potential flashpoint. If citizens or advocacy groups challenge the outsourcing policy in courts, the judiciary may be called upon to interpret whether the state's obligation is satisfied through indirect provision or requires direct institutional control. Such a ruling could set a significant precedent for education policy across Pakistan.

The provincial government, for its part, has signalled no intention of reversing course. Officials continue to emphasize outcomes over ideology, arguing that the ultimate test of any

policy lies in improved learning metrics and increased enrolment. Early data from some outsourced schools, they claim, indicates better attendance and academic performance — though comprehensive, independent evaluations remain limited.

Beyond the immediate policy dispute lies a broader philosophical question: what does 'free and compulsory education' truly entail in a modern governance framework? Is the state obligated to be the sole provider, or can it fulfil its duty through regulated partnerships? And how can accountability be ensured

when public responsibility is diffused across multiple actors?

For now, the answers remain contested. What is clear, however, is that the debate over Punjab's education reforms is not merely administrative — it is constitutional, economic, and deeply human. At stake is not only the interpretation of a legal clause but the lived reality of millions of children whose futures hinge on access to quality education.

As Pakistan continues to grapple with economic constraints and governance challenges, the tension between constitutional ideals and policy pragmatism is likely to intensify. Whether Punjab's experiment becomes a model of reform or a cautionary tale will depend on how effectively it balances efficiency with equity — and innovation with constitutional fidelity.



claim, ensure that education remains free for enrolled students while introducing performance-based accountability mechanisms.

But the counter-narrative is equally forceful. Teachers' unions and civil society organisations have staged protests across Punjab, warning that privatisation — whether partial or indirect — can lead to creeping commercialisation. They fear that over time, hidden costs, reduced oversight, and profit-driven management could erode the principle of free education. More critically, they argue that the state's retreat from direct management weakens institutional capacity and long-term planning in the public sector.

There is also a deeper socio-economic dimension to the debate. Punjab's public schools have historically served as the primary

# Pakistan's silent epidemic of hepatitis and liver disease

Dr. Fatima Khan

This year's World Liver Day, observed under the theme "Solid Habits, Strong Liver," serves as more than a symbolic occasion—it is a stark reminder of a growing public health emergency in Pakistan. While the day aims to promote awareness about liver health globally, its relevance in Pakistan is particularly urgent, where millions remain affected by preventable and treatable liver diseases.

According to estimates shared by the Pakistan Medical Association, between 13.8 and 15 million people in the country are living with hepatitis B or C. Among them, nearly 10 million are affected by hepatitis C alone, placing Pakistan among the countries with the highest disease burden worldwide. These figures highlight not only the scale of the crisis but also the need for a sustained and coordinated response.

What makes the situation more alarming is the widespread lack of awareness. Only about one in four individuals living with hepatitis knows their status. This means millions continue to carry the virus unknowingly, increasing the risk of severe complications such as liver cirrhosis and liver cancer. Early detection is critical in managing these conditions, yet limited screening and low public awareness continue to hinder progress.

The human cost of this crisis is profound. Each year, an estimated 37,000 deaths in Pakistan are attributed to liver-related complications. Behind these numbers are families facing emotional and financial distress, as well as a healthcare system struggling to cope with the growing burden. In many cases, these deaths are preventable through timely diagnosis, proper treatment, and improved healthcare practices.

Regional disparities further complicate the challenge. Certain areas report significantly higher infection rates, reflecting gaps in healthcare access, sanitation, and education. Rural and underserved communities are particularly vulnerable, where limited medical facilities and lack of awareness contribute to delayed diagnosis and treatment. These inequalities underscore the need for a more inclusive healthcare strategy that reaches all segments of the population.

At the root of this crisis lies a combination of systemic shortcomings and changing lifestyle patterns. Unsafe medical practices remain a major driver of hepatitis transmission. The reuse of unsterilized syringes, inadequate infection control measures, and unscreened

blood transfusions continue to expose individuals to unnecessary risks. Despite regulatory frameworks, enforcement remains inconsistent, allowing such practices to persist.

At the same time, non-viral liver diseases are emerging as a growing concern. Poor dietary habits—characterised by excessive consumption of oily foods, sugary drinks, and ultra-processed products—are contributing to the rise of fatty liver disease. Coupled with increasingly sedentary lifestyles, particularly in urban areas, these factors are expanding the scope of liver-related health issues beyond viral infections.

Addressing this multifaceted problem requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond awareness campaigns. While public messaging is important, it must evolve from symbolic gestures to sustained efforts that encourage behavioural change. Routine screening should become a social norm, enabling early detection and reducing the spread of infection. Public health campaigns must also focus on

reforms are essential to achieving meaningful progress. The government must prioritise the strengthening of primary healthcare systems, ensuring that diagnostic and treatment facilities are accessible and affordable across the country. Decentralising healthcare services can play a key role in reaching remote and rural populations, where the need is often greatest.

Affordable treatment options are also critical. Advances in medical science have made hepatitis C, in particular, a curable disease. Yet, access to treatment remains uneven, with many patients unable to afford or access the necessary medications. Expanding treatment programmes and subsidising costs can significantly reduce the disease burden and prevent long-term complications.

Pakistan is not without resources or expertise in tackling this challenge. Over the years, various initiatives and programmes have been launched to combat hepatitis and improve liver health. However, the lack of coordination and continuity has limited their impact. What



educating people about safe medical practices and the importance of seeking treatment from qualified healthcare providers.

Equally important is the promotion of healthier lifestyles. Individuals need to be encouraged to adopt balanced diets, engage in regular physical activity, and exercise caution in the use of medications. Self-medication, a common practice in Pakistan, poses additional risks to liver health and must be addressed through stricter regulation and public education.

However, placing the burden solely on individuals would be insufficient. Structural

is needed now is a unified strategy that brings together policymakers, healthcare providers, and communities in a sustained effort.

In conclusion, World Liver Day should not be viewed as a one-day event but as a call to action. The scale of liver disease in Pakistan demands urgency, commitment, and collaboration at all levels. By prioritising prevention, expanding access to care, and fostering greater awareness, the country can begin to reverse the tide of this silent epidemic. Without such concerted efforts, the burden of liver disease will continue to grow, exacting an ever-increasing toll on public health and national well-being.

# Lebanon cannot be bombed into sovereignty

Sami Halabi

Lebanese leaders have gone to Washington for the first direct negotiations with Israel in over 30 years, attempting to restore sovereignty under near-impossible terms.

According to the ceasefire deal agreed on April 16, Lebanon must “effectively demonstrate its ability to assert its sovereignty” as a condition for extending the fragile pause in hostilities. Israel, for its part, preserves the right to take “all necessary measures in self-defence, at any time” and to keep its forces deployed on Lebanese soil. This is the framework through which Lebanese sovereignty is to be performed. Beirut is expected to move against Hezbollah’s armament while Israel retains effectively open-ended military freedom inside Lebanese territory, with no credible pathway to deterrence on the table.

From Washington’s perspective, the logic is easy enough to understand. Hezbollah is weaker, Tehran is under pressure, Damascus is amenable and the government in Beirut has never been more willing to accede to United States demands. From the White House, it can look like a convergence: a moment where giving Israel military latitude to occupy land, displace southern communities, and float annexation will produce a Lebanese state that the US can shape.

But a government easier to influence is not one that can actually govern. There is a way to disarm Hezbollah and consolidate Lebanese sovereignty, but it is not the current path imposed by the US and Israel.

No serious argument for Lebanese statehood can evade what Hezbollah has done; more than any other Lebanese actor, it has undermined the state’s monopoly on force. It has built and maintained a military structure outside formal institutions, reserved for itself the right to shape decisions of war and peace, vetoed government decisions and done away with many of its domestic opponents by force or the threat of it. The result has been a hybrid order where sovereignty existed in law but not in full practice.

Yet the belief that external force can correct this condition has been tested before and failed. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). It succeeded in driving the PLO leadership out of Beirut but did not produce a stable Lebanese

government or a settlement aligned with Israeli preferences.

The Lebanese Civil War entered a new and arguably more brutal phase, epitomised by an Israeli occupation that lasted until 2000. That occupation became one of the central conditions in which Hezbollah emerged, consolidated and claimed the legitimacy it trades on today. Brute force repeatedly altered the immediate balance while helping create the social and political terrain in which new armed legitimacy could emerge.

Lebanon has also been here before in another sense. Throughout its modern history, as one patron has weakened, another has moved in to fill the vacuum, claiming to champion

reality in which the Lebanese state has very little leverage, domestically and internationally. That hasn’t stopped Salam and Aoun from trying.

The convergence at present with US and Israeli interests is temporary and will break the moment the question shifts from Hezbollah’s weapons to what Israeli troops are still doing on Lebanese land. The reality is that Lebanon’s current deterrence arrangement cannot be broken militarily before it is replaced politically. Hezbollah’s arsenal is not just a military fact; it is also the hard expression of a political claim: that the Lebanese state, as it exists, cannot reliably defend parts of its population against Israel and therefore an alternative structure of deterrence is necessary. One can reject that claim and still recognise its force.

If Hezbollah is to be durably disarmed, Lebanon requires a credible replacement for the functions it has come to perform: military deterrence, political representation, social protection and the assurance that someone can absorb the costs of confronting Israel. Absent that replacement, military pressure, occupation and violations of international law will not settle the question. They will reopen it in harsher form.

A sequenced political process is the only plausible route to the outcome Washington says it wants. It should begin with reciprocity. Lebanon cannot be expected to move decisively on its most explosive internal issue while Israel retains open-ended military freedom inside its territory. If communities in the south and the eastern Bekaa Valley are to see the threat environment changing, that has to mean a monitored halt to attacks, a timetable for Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory and a mechanism for adjudicating violations that does not reduce Lebanese sovereignty to an Israeli claim of necessity. The current agreement contains none of these. It contains the opposite.

A durable settlement would require a phased extension of state authority. The LAF can absorb responsibilities gradually, deploy, monitor and expand its role over time. Even if Washington wants the LAF to fight Hezbollah, it is quite rightly neither willing nor able to do so, not least while Israel is pummeling the country and Washington is forcing it into unrealistic timelines as part of pressure-driven diplomacy. To ask the army to do that is not to strengthen the state; it is to expose its weakness and herald civil strife.



Lebanese sovereignty on its own terms.

Today fits that pattern. Hezbollah and Iran are losing the sway they have held over Beirut for two decades, and Washington and Israel are moving to establish a new dominion. The language of sovereignty is once again doing work that sovereignty, in substance, is not.

The government of Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and President Joseph Aoun, brought about with US-Saudi backing after the 2024 war with Israel ended, is the first national unity government to include Hezbollah and its allies while also clearly articulating a position on consolidating military power under the state. Under this policy, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) began dismantling Hezbollah infrastructure south of the Litani River before the conflict reignited last month. Since then, the government has outlawed Hezbollah’s military wing, expelled the Iranian ambassador and ordered the authorities to identify, arrest and deport members of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Some of these moves were performative, some genuine, but all were limited by the current

# Israel feared Amal Khalil, just as it did Shireen Abu Akleh

Yara Hawari

On April 22, the Israeli regime assassinated yet another journalist. Her name was Amal Khalil. She was a well-known Lebanese journalist, born during the early years of the last Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, who spent years documenting the lives of people in the south of the country amid Israeli invasion and bombardment.

Amal was well-known and beloved across Lebanon. As her brother, Ali Khalil, said at her funeral, she was present in every home. For two years, Amal received direct threats from the Israeli regime. In one interview, she recalled a call from a Mossad agent who threatened to sever her head from her shoulders if she didn't stop reporting from the south. They knew intimate details about her life – they wanted her to know that she was being surveilled.

Yet, she continued to report, knowing that any day the Israeli regime could follow through on its threats. Amal was the type of person Israel fears the most: the one who cannot be intimidated into silence, the one who cannot be sent covering into a corner, the one who openly defies brutal Israeli power. There is little doubt that the Israeli army targeted her directly. Al Akhbar, the outlet Amal worked for, released details of her killing. According to them, Amal was on assignment near the strategic town of Bintjbeil, which she had often reported on in the past.

Bintjbeil was the site of a key battle between Israeli regime forces and Hezbollah fighters before the ceasefire. It is a symbolic site of resistance for many Lebanese – in the 2006 invasion, it successfully repelled many attempts by Israeli regime forces to conquer it. Amal was travelling in a car with freelance photographer Zeinab Farraj when a vehicle in front of them was hit by an Israeli drone. The two women sought shelter in a nearby building where they called relatives and colleagues for help. The building was bombed by Israeli forces not long after.

The Lebanese prime minister put out a statement calling on the Red Cross to inter-

vene. The organisation sent out a team which was able to rescue Zeinab, who was wounded, from the building. They came under fire, so were unable to recover Amal. When they eventually returned, they found her dead. Amal's assassination is chillingly reminiscent of the killing of veteran Palestinian journalist and long-term Al Jazeera correspondent Shireen Abu Akleh. Four years ago, she was also reporting from a site of symbolic resistance against invading Israeli regime forces – the Palestinian city of Jenin. She was shot in the head while attempting to shelter from Israeli fire with a colleague.

made it possible. Impunity is not merely a failure of justice after the fact, rather it is a permission structure that shapes what regimes believe they can do before the fact. The Israeli regime has learned, through decades of experience, that there is no act it can commit that will meaningfully cost it the support of its Western backers, and it has drawn the obvious conclusion.

It would be a mistake to characterise the Israeli regime as uniquely violent in the history of settler colonial projects and imperial regimes. But what distinguishes it is not the nature of the violence so much as the brazenness with which it is conducted, and that



Since her killing, more than 250 Palestinian journalists and media workers have been killed – predominantly during the genocide in Gaza. Many of them were targeted on assignment, others were attacked while they were at home with their families. This was the case with Mohammed Abu Hatab who was killed along with 11 members of his family in an Israeli airstrike on his home in November 2023.

The Israeli regime's targeting of Palestinian and Lebanese journalists is well documented, and the killing of Amal is the latest entry in a record that has become, since October 2023, the deadliest for the press in any conflict in recorded history. What is striking about this record is not simply its scale but the conditions that have

brazenness is itself a product of the impunity.

This is a regime that no longer bothers to disguise what it is doing. Journalists are not caught in crossfire; they are hunted down and targeted. The message being sent is not incidental, it is the point.

Amal understood the risk she was taking and took it anyway, as local journalists in Lebanon and Palestine have done throughout, because someone has to bear witness to what is happening to the people there. The Israeli regime killed her for it.

The world that claims to value a free press will mourn her briefly – just as it did Shireen – and then continue to provide the cover that makes the next killing inevitable.

## The begging trap

The rapidly growing number of beggars in Pakistan is no longer a minor social concern; it has become a defining symptom of deeper economic distress. From crowded urban intersections to international reports of Pakistanis detained abroad for street solicitation in places like Saudi Arabia, the issue has escalated into both a domestic challenge and a source of national embarrassment. Yet, beyond questions of image lies a far more serious problem: the steady normalisation of street dependence as a livelihood.

Begging today operates on a scale that suggests it is not merely incidental poverty at work. In many cities, street solicitation generates earnings that can compete with, or even surpass, the wages of unskilled labour. When an individual can make in a few hours what a labourer earns after a full day of physically demanding work, the economic incentive becomes difficult to ignore. For some, begging is no longer a desperate last resort, but a calculated choice shaped by distorted incentives.

This distortion exposes structural weaknesses in the economy. Chronic inflation has eroded purchasing power, and real household incomes have steadily declined. Job creation has failed to keep pace with population growth, leaving millions underemployed or unemployed. For families already living on the margins, a sudden illness, job loss, or rent increase can push them into visible destitution.

In such circumstances, the street becomes a survival mechanism rather than a preference. However, allowing begging to expand unchecked carries serious long-term consequences. It undermines the dignity of labour and weakens the social contract. When young people observe that street solicitation can provide quicker returns than education or hard work, it risks fostering a culture of dependence. Organised networks that exploit vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children, further complicate the crisis, turning human misery into a business model. The real solution lies in economic and social reform. Sustainable growth must be paired with labour-intensive development strategies that absorb low-skilled workers into productive sectors. Expanding vocational training, microfinance opportunities, and small-business support can help transform idle hands into skilled contributors.

At the same time, social safety nets must become more efficient and transparent, ensuring that assistance reaches the genuinely vulnerable households before they simply fall into street survival.

Sanaullah Mirani  
Daharki

## Wars without battlefields

In an era where wars are no longer fought on battlefields alone, the recent cyber-attack on Pakistani media channels should serve as a

serious wake-up call. Reports aired on news channels indicated that Israeli-linked hackers targeted Pakistani broadcast systems, briefly disrupting transmissions and inserting hostile content. This incident is not merely a technical failure. It is a direct assault on our digital sovereignty and national security.

The attack raises uncomfortable, but vital questions. How were sensitive broadcast systems infiltrated so easily? Are our cybersecurity mechanisms equipped to counter state-sponsored digital aggression? If foreign actors can penetrate media networks today, what prevents them from targeting financial institutions, defence systems or national databases tomorrow? Cyber warfare is no longer hypothetical. It is strategic and psychological, and is designed to destabilise public confidence.

Critically examining the situation, this incident exposes structural weaknesses in our cyber-defence framework. Pakistan has made real progress in digitisation, from online banking to e-governance, but investment in cybersecurity training, monitoring systems and rapid response mechanisms appears insufficient.

According to cybersecurity experts, modern cyberattacks are often coordinated and politically motivated, aimed at manipulating narratives and creating chaos. When media houses become targets, the objective is clear: to undermine trust and project vulnerability. This episode should not be reduced to political rhetoric or temporary outrage. It demands institutional reforms, stronger coordination between intelligence agencies and private media networks, and sustained funding for advanced cyber-defence technologies.

Besides, public awareness campaigns are equally essential as digital literacy remains a weak link in our security chain.

Hamna Yasmeen  
Islamabad

## Scholarships in limbo

The non-payment of educational scholarships under the Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM) has become a growing concern for students across the country. The payment often gets delayed, causing anxiety and frustration. Many deserving students who depend on this financial assistance to continue their studies face serious financial pressures due to late disbursement of funds. Although the scholarship programme is meant to support low-income families and promote access to education, administrative delays and inefficiencies are reducing its effectiveness. As a result, students are struggling to manage their expenses, which negatively affects their education. The authorities concerned must ensure timely, transparent payment so that the purpose of this welfare initiative is truly fulfilled.

Muhammad Anfal  
Islamabad

## Green buses

The initiative of green buses by the government of Balochistan was meant to provide ease and convenience to the general public. However, this is not the case in Turbat. Sadly, people are being treated poorly by bus drivers. People stand on the roadside waiting for the bus, but it often passes them by without stopping. The drivers ignore the passengers — both men and women. For many passengers, this creates serious problems, especially for women who have to stand on the roads for long periods. The government should look into the matter and resolve it as soon as possible.

Iqra Mohammad Jan  
Turbat

## Digital banking under siege

The recent trend of commercial banks charging exorbitant fee for digital banking (internet banking, credit card etc.) and the approval of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) in this regard contradicts the government's push for financial inclusion. One bank has sent a notice of charging 0.75 per cent on all digital banking transactions. This fee will surely discourage users, undermining the shift to cashless transactions. The SBP should urgently regulate these charges, keeping them minimal or making them free to truly encourage digital adoption.

Amir Ali  
Lahore

## Beyond the royal lens

Former Prince Andrew's mother was admirable as a responsible woman and head of state, not to mention a strong one. One wonders how she would have dealt with her reportedly favourite son's involvement in the deeply shameful and apparently criminal Jeffrey Epstein scandal. Like countless others, I feel that the monarchy, a lavish publicly funded institution, has lasted far too long. Clearly, human lives on the planet are not treated as having equal value or worth, although morally they should be. As a good example, the queen was one person, however loved by many. Yet, her death and funeral received more news coverage than was morally justified, especially when compared to other important global events that, at the time, received little or no coverage as a result. I am not the only news consumer troubled by this clear imbalance with respect to media coverage. A late, renowned newsman once highlighted the Western world's seemingly callous, biased and uneven news coverage and consumption well when he rightly said: "A hundred Pakistanis going off a mountain in a bus make less of a story than three Englishmen drowning in the Thames." Unfortunate, but true. Period.

Frank Sterle Jr  
White Rock, Canada

## 'Iran's Maldives' could drown in oil due to spills from air strikes, satellites show

Sascha Pare

Oil spills in the Persian Gulf are visible from space after Iranian and U.S.-Israeli air strikes hit oil facilities and tankers across the region, satellite images reveal. One image, taken April 10, shows oil leaking into the waters off Iran's Lavan Island and heading toward Shidvar Island, a protected wildlife refuge known as "Iran's Maldives." Another snap from April 6 captures an oil trail leaving Kuwait's Port of Shuaiba, located about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Kuwait City, after Iran said it targeted energy and petrochemical facilities in the Gulf countries April 5. And on March 18, April 2 and April 7, huge oil spills were visible in the Strait of Hormuz off Iran's Qeshm Island, which houses key military and civilian infrastructure. These oil spills will likely affect the Persian Gulf's marine life and the filtering systems of desalination plants, which supply clean, drinkable water to almost 100 million people in the region, CNN reported. The oil spill off Lavan Island, in particular, is a "major environmental emergency" due to its proximity to Shidvar Island, Wim Zwijnenburg, a project leader in humanitarian disarmament at the Dutch peace organization PAX, told CNN. Shidvar Island is an uninhabited coral island that hosts seabird colonies and turtle nesting grounds. At least five locations on Lavan Island have been hit by U.S.-Israeli forces, Zwijnenburg said, including an oil refinery. Pools of oil off Qeshm Island measured more than 5 miles (8 km) long, threatening the entire marine ecosystem, from microorganisms to dolphins and whales.



## Bright-green fireball meteor caught exploding over famous Viking raid site in UK

Harry Baker

A photographer snapped a bright-green fireball streaking across the starry sky above an iconic castle and famous Viking raid site in northeast England, after a meteor spectacularly broke apart upon entering Earth's atmosphere. On April 13, shortly after midnight local time, a meteor exploded above the North Sea, off the east coast of England. The space rock, which was traveling around 20,000 mph (32,000 km/h), was on the small side, likely weighing around 0.4 ounces (12 grams), according to the BBC — but it made a big impression. At least 230 people — from across the U.K., as well as parts of Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany — reported seeing the fireball to the American Meteor Society, a nonprofit that tracks global meteor sightings. The streaking light was also captured by multiple doorbell cameras and lasted up to seven seconds, according to witness reports. Photographer Ian Sproat saw the fireball from Lindisfarne, also known as "Holy Island" — a small landmass off the coast of Northumberland that gets cut off from the mainland at high tide. This was the site of a brutal Viking raid in 793, in which attackers ransacked a monastery and killed or enslaved many of the Christian monks who lived there. Sproat and his friends were attempting to photograph the starry band of the Milky Way stretching over Lindisfarne Castle (built in the 16th century, long after the historic raid), when the fireball blazed overhead, allowing him to capture a time-lapse image of the meteor.



## Egg coffee is percolating on TikTok, but may pose serious health risks

Jase Peoples

A sweet, creamy twist on your morning cup of coffee is going viral on social media. It's called egg coffee, and it's typically made by whisking egg yolks with sugar and condensed milk into a rich, custard-like foam, then layering it over a strong cup of joe or espresso. While the drink is currently trending on TikTok, it isn't exactly new. Versions of the dessert-like beverage have been around for decades, including Vietnamese egg coffee (càphê trứng), Swedish egg coffee, and Italian egg-based drinks like zabaglione al caffè. But as the drink gains popularity, some experts are warning that it can carry some serious health risks. One of the biggest concerns about egg coffee is how it's made. Many recipes call for raw or lightly heated egg yolks, which can carry Salmonella bacteria. "Consuming egg coffee using raw or undercooked yolk does carry a salmonella risk that shouldn't be ignored," said Michelle Routhenstein, a preventive cardiology dietitian at Entirely Nourished.



While some people may assume that hot coffee is enough to make the drink safe, Routhenstein warns that's usually not the case. "Hot coffee does not typically reach a safe temperature to cook the egg and reduce the potential risk of salmonella contamination," Routhenstein said. Salmonella infection can cause symptoms such as diarrhea, fever, and stomach cramps, which may begin anywhere from a few hours to a few days after exposure.

While many healthy people recover without treatment, the infection can be more serious for certain groups, including older adults, pregnant people, and those with compromised immune systems.

## A simple sugar in ultra-processed foods may drive obesity, metabolic disease

Mandy French

Fructose is a simple sugar that is found both naturally, in honey and fruits, and in sweeteners like high-fructose corn syrup and sucrose (table sugar).



A recent review published in *Nature Metabolism* Trusted Source highlights the role fructose plays in driving disease. This is separate from its role as a source of calories. Consumption of fructose has grown significantly over the past few centuries, driven by the increased use of sweeteners in the average diet. Fructose can be problematic because it has twice the sweetness of glucose. This may lead to increased cravings for more fructose-containing foods and drinks. "Fructose found in these processed forms is not handled the same way as regular blood sugar," said Michelle Routhenstein, preventive cardiology dietitian at Entirely Nourished, who wasn't involved in the study. "When it is consumed, it goes to the liver, where it easily turns into fat, which can build up in the liver and around the organs and contribute to conditions like fatty liver and metabolic syndrome," she told Healthline.

Unlike glucose, fructose has unique metabolic effects. These effects may help contribute to obesity and related conditions. "The emerging body of research suggests that fructose is not metabolically identical to all other carbohydrates, especially when it is consumed in excess through sugar-sweetened beverages and ultra-processed foods," said Serena Poon, certified nutritionist & longevity wellness advisor. Poon wasn't involved in the study.

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