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What are US H-1B visas for skilled workers and what changes loom?

US employers seeking to hire skilled foreign workers can use the federal government's H-1B visa programme for a fee, allowing tech and other professionals from abroad to work in the United States for a few years.

US President Donald Trump, who has pursued a broad immigration

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Convention Approves Resolution Calling for New Province in Pakistan

Shakeel Khan & Amir Zaidi Hosts Houston Gathering on Pakistan's Future



HOUSTON: A convention of overseas Pakistanis in Houston has approved a resolution calling for the creation of a new province in Pakistan, with participants emphasizing that smaller administrative units could help improve governance, ensure a fairer distribution of resources and bring government

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Pakistan expects US reply on \$10b stabilisation facility 'soon'

Pakistan expects to receive a response from Washington within the next couple of months on its request for a \$10 billion bilateral stabilisation facility, as Islamabad seeks to build on its improving ties with the Trump administration.

Adviser to the Finance Minister Khurram Schehzad told Bloomberg on Tuesday that discussions with the

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US pauses immigrant visa applications worldwide

The Trump administration has paused immigrant visa applications worldwide to accommodate "in-depth training" for consular officers,

as it seeks to screen out applicants deemed likely to need US assistance, The Financial Times (FT) reported.

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Mayor Mamdani opposes NYC event with leader of India's Hindu nationalist group

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani said

Continued on page 12

Abbott targets Texas airport prayer-washing rooms, drawing outcry

AUSTIN — Texas Governor Greg Abbott has asked the U.S. Justice Department to

investigate Islamic ablution facilities at two major Texas

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US expands immigration enforcement into domestic air travel
Rights groups warn of a chilling effect as ICE gains a bigger airport presence and access to passenger data
WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is increasingly using U.S. airports for immigration enforcement, with the Department
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THE ICE IS MELTING — AND SO IS THE ILLUSION OF CERTAINTY

There is a particular silence that precedes every important thing that happens in a country like Pakistan, and if you have lived long enough inside its politics, you learn to read that silence the way a sailor reads the sky before a storm. Power here does not announce itself. It does not raise its voice. It sits in the space between a smile and a glance, in the half-second a camera lingers on one man's face after another man has spoken. And if you were watching closely — if you have learned, as I have learned, over four decades of watching this country lie to itself and tell itself the truth in the same breath — you would have seen it: a President calling a Field Marshal "ours," and in the very next instant, the camera drifting toward a Prime Minister's carefully arranged composure, and beside him, the Field Marshal's smile, small and knowing, like a door left ajar.

This was not a ceremony. This was a message, and messages in Pakistan are almost never spoken. They are performed.

I have watched this country's power change hands so many times that I have stopped being surprised by the choreography, only by how well-rehearsed it always is. Independence Day came wrapped, this year, in the shadow of a new monument — the Yadgar-e-Fatah, built in a matter of weeks to commemorate a military triumph the government has been eager to narrate as destiny fulfilled. And beneath the flags and the anthems, something else was happening, something far older than the monument itself: a negotiation, silent and total, between the institutions that have always run this country and the elected men who have always needed their permission to keep running it.

Mr. Zardari's politics have never been the politics of loud

declaration. He is a man who understands, better than almost anyone in the history of this republic, that silence is a weapon and patience is a strategy. When he called the Field Marshal "ours," he was not offering affection. He was closing a deal that had, until that moment, seemed uncertain — a deal that had, for weeks, produced whispers of a rupture no one wanted to name aloud, rumors traded on television screens and on TikTok in equal measure, rumors of a carpet about to be pulled, a sky about to fall.

And then, nothing fell. Instead: signatures. Judges took their oaths. The Assembly and the Senate were summoned into session, and the river of Pakistani politics, which had been dammed by suspicion, began to flow again.

I do not believe this was coincidence. I have watched Mr. Zardari long enough to recognize the pattern: take the hard line, hold it, hold it a little longer, and then — at the exact moment the whole arrangement seems ready to collapse — step back, having secured, quietly, everything you actually came for. This is not surrender. This is the oldest trick in the oldest book of Pakistani politics, and the Pakistan Peoples Party, whatever else may be said of it, has never forgotten how to play it.

But the real question — the question beneath the question — is what, precisely, this quiet realignment is for.

The answer is the 28th Amendment: not a mere legal adjustment, but a structural reordering of how power moves through this country — provincial authority, the NFC Award, the entire architecture of local government, all of it being rebuilt in real time. And a state cannot rebuild its own skeleton alone. It needs every party's thumbprint, every signature of



By Raja Zahid
Akhtar Khanzada

consent, because an incomplete consensus today is a seed of instability tomorrow. This is the lesson history keeps teaching Pakistan and Pakistan keeps refusing to learn: that a constitution built on exclusion is a constitution built on borrowed time.

This is where the story of Imran Khan's party becomes inseparable from the story of Mr. Zardari's.

Khan is no ordinary prisoner. He sits, even now, at the center of a political force without whose cooperation no amendment of this magnitude can claim legitimacy. This is why the expected meeting with Sohail Afridi carries weight beyond its surface. This is why the quiet messages said to pass through Bushra Bibi carry weight. This is why the meetings with Barrister Gohar — meetings that will never be formally acknowledged, because acknowledgment was never the point — matter more than their denial suggests. What is hidden in Pakistani politics is rarely hidden by accident. It is hidden because it is important, and because the men who arrange these things have learned that the most consequential decisions in this country are made where no one is permitted to watch.

But there is a deeper contradiction here, and it may be the truest test PTI will face in the months ahead. When a man like Akbar S. Babar — who once left the party on principle, at real cost to himself — suddenly speaks of reconnecting with the "old guard," this is not simply news. It is a maneuver. Whether that door ever actually opens matters less than the fact of its announcement, because the announcement itself is the point: not reconciliation, but division. Not the mending of PTI, but its further fracturing.

And the fractures are already visible — Aleema Khan's circle, the barrister's faction, Fawad Chaudhry and his allies, the widening distance between Asad Qaiser and Salman Akram Raja. None of this is accidental. It is, I believe, part of a design: to keep a movement from ever becoming a party, to keep a party from ever becoming a force capable of shaking the streets. The establishment will never allow it to be otherwise, because an organized party can be managed, negotiated with, contained. An unorganized movement is a permanent danger — unpredictable, unbound, always capable of becoming something no one planned for.

So what does the future hold?

Two dates will tell us more than any analyst's prediction: August 17th, when Parliament convenes, and August 18th, when the Supreme Court is expected to rule. These are the twin doors through which the coming months of Pakistani politics will pass. The PPP has already made its move, and in stepping back, it may have moved closer to what it actually wanted all along. PTI's posture in Parliament is expected to soften. A return to parliamentary committees seems increasingly likely. And the presence, in the months ahead, of judges perceived as independent will lend the proceedings the appearance of constitutional legitimacy —

regardless of what has already been settled behind closed doors.

Political circles suggest Khan will be granted some relief — but not relief so complete that it overturns the entire board. This is a game played one step at a time: access to media, permitted visits, perhaps eventually a transfer to Bani Gala — small mercies, arriving slowly, deliberately. But full freedom, the political wisdom holds, will never be granted. Because the day Imran Khan is truly free is the day he makes decisions that answer to no one else's calculations — and that day would unsettle every arrangement now being carefully built.

This, I believe, is the truth beneath all of it: the PPP and the ruling coalition do not want Imran Khan's full return to political life. They want only as much cooperation as a constitutional amendment requires — no more. And PTI, for all its internal wreckage, will have to learn what every party in this country eventually learns: that in Pakistani politics, total victory almost never arrives. It comes instead in installments, in compromises, in concessions offered quietly and accepted even more quietly.

The ice, it is true, is melting. But the melting of ice does not always announce spring. Sometimes it announces only this: that the season is changing, and that every player on this frozen field must now search, once again, for solid ground beneath their feet.

The next chapter of Pakistani politics will be the story of that search — a story in which the centers of power tighten their grip even as they loosen their hands, and in which even those who hold that grip understand a truth as old as the country itself: in this game, there is no final victory and no final defeat. There is only the next move.

Credit rating upgrade

Pakistan's credit rating continues to steadily improve, with Moody's Ratings upgrading the country's sovereign credit rating to B3 from Caa1, with a stable outlook. The upgrade - the latest in a series of positive signals following S&P Global Ratings' similar move last month - reflects growing international recognition that Pakistan's economic trajectory is finally turning a corner. The rating is also the highest Pakistan has received from Moody's since June 2022. The last time the rating was higher than B3 was in November 2007 - one month before Benazir Bhutto's assassination and at the tail end of a very violent and politically volatile year.

The rating agency cited tangible improvements such as high-

er foreign exchange reserves, currently standing at \$17 billion, sufficient to cover nearly three months of imports. The External Vulnerability Indicator, which is based on short- and long-term maturing debt relative to reserves, has also improved from 230% to about 145%. The national debt has become somewhat more affordable, with interest payments falling to roughly 35% of government revenue in FY26, down from 49% the previous year. The painful austerity measures forced upon the country by the IMF-supported reform programme have clearly worked. While we are still a long way from being considered a 'safe' investment destination, Moody's describes us as now being in the "speculative" and "high credit risk", rather than "poor quali-

ty" and "very high credit risk."

Still, there is a long way to go before we cross the threshold for what is considered "investment grade", where risk is considered moderate and not particularly speculative. But as policy-makers gain more wiggle room for decision-making, it will be important for them to keep putting out budgets that continue to improve economic indicators and increase investor and public trust in the economy. Moody's announcement cautioned that surveys still "point to weak rule of law and control of corruption, as well as limited government effectiveness". Without properly addressing these, the economy will continue to trudge along, but not much more.

Muslim politics struggle

The Gulf model always inspires Pakistanis as an authoritarian success story.

Muhammad Amir Rana

THERE are roughly 50 Muslim-majority countries in the world, nearly half of which claim to practise some form of democracy. Yet, arguably, only about seven to 11 qualify as functioning electoral democracies. This raises an uncomfortable question: why has democracy struggled to take deeper root in much of the Muslim world?

Whatever the reason, the fact is that the majority of Muslim nations are still struggling to grasp the idea of a nation-state, and democracy is still an alien concept in the minds of Muslim power elites.

The debate about democracy, governance and statecraft is still pinching many Muslim nations. Apart from a few countries, the majority of Muslim states have their own excuses for why Western-style democracy cannot work in their societies. This approach is called exceptionalism, ie, even if a process is delivering somewhere, it does not mean it will work everywhere.

Interestingly, despite the exceptionalism approach, many failed hybrid democracies look towards Muslim monarchies and authoritarian states; although they are absolute and controlled systems, they do enjoy economic prosperity and relatively stable social orders. Even so, many people are not satisfied with circumstances, as evidenced in the polit-

ical turmoil that often jolts Muslim countries. But power elites are so resilient and power structures so strong that they cannot be broken. For instance, the Arab Spring failed to bring about lasting and substantive change to the MENA region. In fact, Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, and once its strongest democratic success story, eventually drifted towards a controlled political order. In July 2021, President Kais Saied invoked emergency powers, dismissed the prime minister, and suspended parliament. The 2022 constitution subsequently concentrated greater authority in the presidency. It weakened parliament, while electoral reforms reduced the role of political parties, demonstrating how a democratic transition can gradually give way to centralised and personalised rule.

Certainly, Pakistan is no different from the ummah when it comes to practising democracy. It is once again facing a democratic crisis. It is evident that the power elites here have decided to follow the path of fully authoritarian regimes, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. The Gulf model always inspires Pakistanis the most as an authoritarian success story. This idea especially strikes Pakistanis visiting there when they see efficient airports, functioning infrastructure, low street crime, digital government and enormous investment — and then they return to a

noisy, polarised and poorly governed democracy.

But a comparative analysis between Pakistan and Qatar or the UAE fails to hold up. For instance, the UAE has roughly 11 million inhabitants, with citizens forming a minority of the resident population. In contrast, Pakistan has more than 240m people, vast ethnic and linguistic diversity, a federal constitutional structure, enormous regional inequalities, and far lower per capita resources. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE also have vastly different state-society fiscal relationships due to their hydrocarbon endowments. One cannot simply foist the Gulf political model on Pakistan. China reinforces the same intellectual temptation.

What does not inspire elites in Muslim nations in crisis are models from East Asia, mainly Indonesia and Malaysia, which are comparatively free according to the Freedom House Index. In contrast, another country in the region, Myanmar, has adopted a system based on a blend of the Egyptian and Thai governance models. It is a case study in how a military institution moves from the role of occasional political arbiter to a constitutionally protected guardian of the state.

Recent experiences in Egypt, Thailand, and Myanmar demonstrate how military dominance can evolve into a more institutionalised political order. In Egypt, the

military removed President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, but Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's subsequent rule did not depend solely on martial law. The 2019 constitutional amendments expanded presidential powers and strengthened the military's constitutional role as guardian of the state and political order. Thailand followed a comparable trajectory after the 2014 military coup there. Its 2017 constitution strengthened unelected institutions and introduced an appointed 250-member senate, making it difficult for popular political forces to translate electoral victories into governing power. The progressive Move Forward Party illustrated this contradiction: it won the most seats in the 2023 election but could not form a government and was later dissolved by the constitutional court.

Myanmar represents the most extreme version of this model. Its 2008 constitution guaranteed the military 25 per cent of parliamentary seats, control over key security ministries and an effective veto over constitutional change. Elected civilian governments could therefore govern but not fundamentally alter the military designed system.

These cases carry an important lesson for the country's power elites: modern military dominance does not necessarily require abolishing parliament, political parties, courts or elections. Instead, constitutional

amendments, institutional engineering and carefully defined political boundaries can restrict what elected governments can do. Yet Thailand also demonstrates the limits of such engineering: institutions can suppress political parties, but they cannot necessarily suppress the electorate behind them; voters may repeatedly recreate new political movements to express the same demands.

Turkiye is usually quoted as a case of authoritarianism, using many of the same instruments. Still, the case differs because the principal agent was not the military but an elected civilian leader. The crucial moment was the 2017 constitutional referendum, conducted under a state of emergency following the failed 2016 coup attempt. It transformed Turkiye from a parliamentary system into an executive presidential system, greatly strengthening the presidency.

The Turkish political model may inspire some within Pakistan's power structures, but the Tunisian model, too, fascinates elites, as gradual electoral and governance-related reforms have reduced the role of political parties.

The elites have many options and temptations; the real burden falls on the ordinary citizens, for whom the path to a better life is becoming increasingly difficult.

The writer is a security analyst.

Empty promises

Why has the system collapsed and at whose hands?

Sufiyan Bin Muneer

SYSTEMS collapse when promises are not honoured. In a democracy, institutional health is measured by how each branch — legislature, executive and judiciary — upholds its commitments. One such commitment is to conduct elections within 90 days of the dissolution of an assembly as required by the Constitution. Commitments exist for the collective good. They collapse when they are negotiated to secure personal or institutional ambitions — such as when a law is tailored to protect the tenure of the chief justice.

Democracy, as currently practised, is designed in a way that cultivates a kind of collective inanity. Representatives surrender their own thinking, and the promises they made to the people, to the party; the parties, in turn, obey the whip and toe the line. Truth is not considered valuable in and of itself; it is a tool in a box, taken out when useful and put away when not. This can be seen in the

26th and 27th Amendments, and the Peca and NAB amendments, each tied by its defenders to the 'public good'. Those who supported these laws gave more importance to optics that would present them in a favourable light, than to truth itself.

Against what standard, then, should these promises be measured? Political and economic stability rests on a fairly simple premise: legislatures exist to enact laws that promote peace and security. The role of the executive is to create an environment where people are not afraid of voicing their concerns. The role of the judicial branch is to ensure that the system rests on justice, and not oppression. Measure the promises made against these standards to see where we actually stand and at what point the system collapsed.

But that is hard to ascertain when the language we use around politics and economics has grown hollow and vague — and our thinking along with it. George Orwell made a relat-

ed point in his essay Politics and the English Language. He argued that the language we use around economics and politics has become hollow, flatter and vaguer, and our thinking about politics and economics, too, has become flatter and vaguer with it. When we are asked for our opinion on an issue, Orwell says, we are handed a menu of clichés and ready-made platitudes, and we limit ourselves to rattling these off. A leader can say 'the system has collapsed' — a sentence constructed to sound like an admission while holding no one accountable. The question is — whose system has collapsed, and at whose hands? A government will announce 'negative growth', instead of admitting a recession, because the euphemism does the work the truth is not permitted to do.

The Constitution — a social contract — ought to be upheld by those tasked with implementing it. Any contract dies the moment one party stops honouring it. Ghalib wrote:

"Qatre mein dijla dikhai na de aur juzv mein kul/ Khel larkon ka hua, deeda-i-beena na hua." If the river cannot be seen in the drop, if the whole cannot be found in its smallest part, then this is not insight but a child's game. A missed deadline, continuous disregard of judicial pronouncements, a compromised electoral system, a mandate believed to be stolen — these are not separate failures to be tallied. Each one reflects a total collapse, visible in a single drop, for those willing to actually see it.

Sanctity of promises constitutes the bedrock of society. It is what makes or breaks a relationship. The trust of our citizens has been eroded so many times that changing words in the Constitution now means little, when what was needed was to uphold the document in the first place. An environment is now being created for further constitutional amendments, sought through the same people who broke the last set of promises. That

we allow this cycle to repeat itself is not merely a failure of politics; it is a failure to look ahead.

Kant identified why we so rarely see clearly enough to demand better. In his essay on enlightenment, he wrote that human beings remain in a self-imposed immaturity, mainly out of cowardice and laziness, unable to use their own understanding without another's guidance. We have outsourced our thinking, and our belief, to the people we follow and the technology we depend on. Praising the interior minister for saying, on camera, what was once only said in drawing rooms is nothing more than silliness. This attitude mistakes candour about dishonesty for honesty itself. What we need is not a minister admitting what is said behind closed doors, nor another amendment. We need to respect our people and to honour the promises made to them in the Constitution.

The writer is a lawyer based in Karachi.

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Unlearnt lessons of history

Maleeha Lodhi

TODAY, the country's hybrid government is fixated on altering Pakistan's constitutionally mandated provincial structure and multiplying administrative units. To sell the idea, establishment apologists have rolled out some disingenuous arguments. They claim this will improve governance and miraculously solve the country's problems overnight.

A debate has been generated in the media about the pros and cons of administrative changes and breaking provinces into more units. Parliament has yet to discuss this. That is unsurprising. Deliberation is not this legislature's strong suit. It has rushed through constitutional amendments in record time, once in the dead of night and without meaningful debate. Meanwhile, speculation is mounting that another constitutional amendment is being prepared to push through 'administrative changes'.

Absent from the establishment's consideration of these sweeping changes are lessons from Pakistan's history. Over the decades, the country's rulers have experimented with parliamentary, presidential, semi-presidential, quasi-parliamentary systems, direct military rule, and more recently a hybrid model, which involves informal power-sharing between the military and civilians, with the former as dominant partner. Pakistan has tried them all. Yet each switch only contributed to political instability. The only system to command legitimacy and

broad support is parliamentary democracy, despite the fact that parliamentary supremacy over the executive has never been realised.

Linked to these experiments has been the status and rights of provinces in a federal system. As the provincial configuration and federating units largely coincided with the ethnic composition of people of each province, the need was always felt to make federalism a reality, not just a constitutional precept to ensure the people of all four provinces felt they were part of an inclusive and fair system.

But the federal structure and provincial rights have always been contested issues in Pakistan's history. Contested on many counts. Smaller provinces have long resented Punjab's political hegemony, sought greater powers and autonomy and felt the distribution of resources has been unfair. Unelected institutions have always preferred a centralised polity while military rule meant the country functioned as a virtual unitary state. Long periods of unrepresentative rule fuelled alienation among the smaller provinces by marginalising them, suppressing regional identities, concentrating power at the centre and weakening federalism.

The creation of One Unit in the 1950s, which merged all the provinces of what was then West Pakistan into a single unit, was aimed at creating 'parity' with the more populous eastern wing of the country to undercut its numerical

majority. This politically motivated project imposed a unitary system and all but destroyed the country's federal character. It was justified by totally false and frivolous arguments. They included claims it would end "provincial prejudices", reduce administrative expenses and help develop backward areas. The move had disastrous consequences. It fanned the flames of nationalist and regionalist sentiment in the smaller provinces of West Pakistan and strengthened centrifugal forces across the country. It contributed to the sense of discrimination among the people of East Pakistan that, along with other factors, found expression in the Bengali nationalist movement and ultimately led to the break-up of Pakistan in 1971.

The issue of provincial rights continued to be a source of tensions and contestation. The 1973 Constitution struck a delicate balance between the centre and provinces in a multiethnic state, assured provincial autonomy and enjoined reciprocal obligations between the federating units. Unfortunately, this was observed more in its breach than in its adherence. Opposition-run provincial governments were ousted in the 1970s by prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This reinforced a political tradition that began in the early years after independence when provincial governments were summarily dismissed by the central government. This seriously undermined national unity.

These and other actions widened interprovincial disparities, deepened alienation among smaller provinces and led to the insurgency in Balochistan in the 1970s. This intensified during the 2000s but their antecedents reached back to the 1950s. The insurgency continues today as a result of monumental mishandling of the province and Baloch sentiment by successive governments. Authoritarian measures also gave a fillip to Pakhtun nationalism, even though over time this waned with the increasing representation of KP in the country's power elite and bureaucracy.

The troubled history of federalism and provincial tensions in Pakistan offers a cautionary lesson against altering the country's four ethnically distinct provinces. Past attempts to do that or erode constitutionally guaranteed provincial rights only widened fault lines and created new ones. These efforts were never about better governance or a stronger administrative system. They were about control. They reflected the interests of a ruling elite seeking to entrench political dominance, with little regard for national unity and cohesion. The same logic applies to those in the current hybrid government pushing to create new provinces and fragment existing ones. This is about control, not reform.

True ethnic minorities in some provinces, such as Seraiki speakers in southern Punjab, have long want-

ed their own province. Some political parties have actively supported this. But the challenge is how to square this with carving out a new unit that could undermine the delicate constitutional balance, spark controversy and encourage others to demand new provinces.

The 18th Constitutional Amendment, backed by all parties in 2010, opened a new chapter in provincial empowerment. Over a dozen ministries were devolved from the federal level to the provinces. But this also raised capacity issues and whether provinces could handle the increased fiscal power and resources devolved to them. The fiscal aspect evoked the most criticism. Because with the 2009 National Finance Commission award, the substantial transfer of resources to the provinces left the federal government unable to meet its financial obligations. While this tussle over revenue needs to be resolved and provinces should mobilise their own resources, creating smaller provinces or rolling back the amendment is not the answer.

In fact, the rationale for redrawing provincial boundaries remains opaque. This lack of clarity reinforces the impression that the motive is to increase control, not to improve governance. If we want real reform, it's not by carving out new provinces. It's by empowering local government.

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.

'Grand dialogue'

THE country's top civil and military leaders are absolutely right when they say that dialogue and development are needed to address Balochistan's crises.

But perhaps one should recall that many earlier attempts by the state to bring peace to the province were stalled or remain unimplemented. In order to truly stabilise Balochistan and bring lasting peace to this troubled province, a credible political process must begin, with the state guaranteeing that it will fully implement previous promises, as well as new agreements.

While speaking at the Balochistan National Workshop in Islamabad recently, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called for a "grand, frank and meaningful dialogue" to

address the province's issues. He added that the province's people had first right over its resources. In a similar vein the chief of defence forces stressed the need for empowering Balochistan's youth.

It is certainly welcome that the rulers see the need to tackle Balochistan's political problems through dialogue. While kinetic measures are needed to deal with immediate terrorist threats, the underlying factors fuelling discontent can only be handled through a political process. The state must keep in mind previous attempts to address the province's problems.

For example, the PPP government had in 2009 launched the Aghaz-i-Huqooq-i-Balochistan package. Despite the passage of 17 years, many of the package's key

points remain unimplemented. For example, it had proposed releasing political workers, except those involved in heinous crimes. However, over the past few months, we have seen peaceful activists rounded up and thrown in jail. Similarly, the 2009 package had sought to address the province's socioeconomic woes; suffice it to say, social indicators in Balochistan remain miserable. The PML-N had launched a package of its own in 2015. Much of that scheme also remains unfulfilled. CPEC was similarly supposed to transform the province's fortunes. It has not.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, the state must implement what it had promised in these packages. Many of these

schemes' salient points reflect the demands of the province's nationalist politicians. Therefore, to implement these promises in full, a grand dialogue should bring on board the province's genuine political leadership, as well as peaceful activists, while a verifiable and transparent mechanism needs to be worked out to help implement previous and new promises.

The past few months have seen a sharp spike in terrorist activity in Balochistan. The only sustainable way of addressing the insurgency is to supplement kinetic actions with a genuine political process that can, in the long-term, eliminate the underlying factors that are fuelling discontent.

Fast Walkers Could Cut Their Risk of Cognitive Decline in Half, New Study

Let's break down what the researchers found.

As we age, our ability to go through life independently becomes more important—and it involves both physical and cognitive health. Unfortunately, the rate of dementia seems to be increasing in the U.S. (Dementia is an umbrella term for progressive brain conditions that worsen over time, and Alzheimer's disease is one kind of dementia.) People with dementia lose the ability to think, remember and reason at levels that affect daily life and activities.

But there are ways to prevent or slow the progression of dementia and cognitive decline, including what you eat and how you move your body.³ And while many kinds of exercise can have benefits for your brain, one of the most common ways to get moving is a simple one: walking.⁴

Researchers from several New York universities examined data from three long-term studies to see if there was any connection between walking speed and dementia risk among older adults.⁵ Let's dive deeper into how they conducted this study and what they found.

How Was This Study Conducted?

The researchers drew data from three long-term studies that followed people who were at least 80 years old at baseline with no clinical diagnosis of dementia: the U.S. Health and Retirement Study (HRS-INS), the LonGenity study and the RUSH MAP study. Between the three studies, there were a total of about 4,000 participants. Each study collected various data, including walking speed, results of cognitive tests, brain imaging and brain autopsies, in addition to demographic data, family history, parental longevity, education level and dementia-related diagnoses.

Based on timed walking tests, these researchers defined "super movers" as people with a walking speed of at least 1.5 standard deviations above the average walking speed of people their own age. Researchers compared data from these super movers to data from non-super movers to see if the groups had a different risk of dementia.

What Did This Study Find?

The overarching finding of this study was that super movers had about a 50% lower risk of cognitive impairment compared to non-super movers.

Super movers also showed slower rates of memory-related and non-memory-related cognitive decline and had more brain matter in the hippocampus (the part of the brain that plays a pivotal role in memory). In addition, super movers also had lower rates of Alzheimer's disease, though the brain autopsies showed no major differences between the super movers and non-super movers regarding dementia-related pathologies.

The study authors point out a few limitations of their study, including potential confounding factors that they didn't take into consideration. Additionally, the subset of individuals who had brain imaging data was relatively small and, therefore, limited some of the measurements. Lastly, one of the studies was made up of a higher proportion of super movers, which may have skewed the results.

How Does This Apply to Real Life?

We've reported numerous times in the past about the connection between physical activity and dementia risk. And while studies differ in how much physical activity—including duration, frequency and intensity—many agree that being physically active lowers the risk of dementia.

This study suggests that increasing the intensity of your walk, by walking faster, may decrease dementia risk more than walking slower. There could be several reasons why. For starters, moving your muscles increases blood flow, including to the brain. Moving faster can help get your blood pumping faster. Movement also increases BDNF, a brain protein essential for healthy cognition.⁶

In addition, being intentional about arm swing while walking may help engage more parts of the brain—and it's natural to increase arm movement when you pick up the speed.⁷

Interestingly, one of the signs of cognitive decline is a change in gait (walking posture and technique), including reduced arm movement.

Walking is a great form of exercise. It strengthens the heart and lungs, improves mood and strengthens muscles. Plus, it's free and can be done just about anywhere. If you're not currently a regular walker, start by going for short jaunts several times a week. Base your intensity and duration on your current fitness level and progressively increase the length of the walk, frequency and intensity over time.

If you're already a regular walker, maybe it's time to kick it up a notch. Your speed doesn't have to increase for the entire walk. Try increasing it in spurts, turning your walk into an interval workout. You could also increase the intensity of your walk by mixing up the terrain and including hills—just make sure you're steady on your feet and in some secure shoes.

How you eat, your stress levels and your sleep also have links to dementia.⁹10 This is why it's important to take a holistic approach to your health and keep the big picture in mind—and that includes relaxing and spending time with loved ones. Some research has also linked loneliness with an increased risk of dementia.

Our Expert Take

This study suggests that super movers—people who walk faster than other people the same age—have a 50% lower risk of dementia. While any movement is better than none, bumping up the speed of your walk may yield greater benefits than a slow stroll.

And if you want some more tips for lowering dementia risk, aim for seven or eight hours of quality sleep a night, work on managing your stress, spend time socializing and eat anti-inflammatory foods, like what you'll find in the MIND diet.

Ready to get started? Try our 30-Day MIND Diet Meal Plan for Cognitive Health.

FORT BEND COUNTY: WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING?

Fort Bend County residents have heard conflicting claims about who is serving as County Judge, what the courts have decided, and why Commissioners Court attendance matters. Here are the facts based on court proceedings and public reporting.

★ FORT BEND COUNTY ★

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

THE FACTS. THE RECORD. THE PROCESS.



APRIL 10

APRIL 13

APRIL 23

JUNE 16

JUNE 17

JULY

JULY 23

AUGUST 5

AUGUST 10

AUGUST 28

OCTOBER 16

NOVEMBER 10

KP George suspended from office. Judge Jeth Jones appoints Judge Daniel Wong to perform the duties of County Judge.

Judge Daniel Wong is sworn in and begins serving as County Judge.

Commissioners Court unanimously records Judge Daniel Wong's oath and term through December 31, 2026.

KP George is separately suspended without pay following his felony convictions, pending appeal.

The original civil removal lawsuit against George is dismissed, creating a legal dispute over the continuing effect of Judge Daniel Wong's appointment.

Competing legal actions are filed over Judge Daniel Wong's authority to continue serving.

Judge Jeth Jones hears arguments concerning his original appointment order and takes the matter under advisement.

Judge Edward Krenek confirms that Judge Daniel Wong continues exercising the powers of County Judge while the separate legal challenge proceeds.

Judge Jeth Jones denies motions seeking to modify the judgment in the original case. His order does not remove Judge Daniel Wong or vacate the April order that resulted in him taking office.

Current deadline for discovery responses in the pending quo warranto case.

Hearing scheduled on motions that could potentially resolve the case before trial.

Trial scheduled if the case has not already been resolved.



Q1: HOW DID DANIEL WONG BECOME COUNTY JUDGE?

Q2: IS HE CURRENTLY SERVING?

Judge Jones-appointed Wong on April 10, 2026, to perform the duties. Commissioner Court unanimously voted to record his oath and term through Dec 31, 2026.

Yes. Judge Krenek confirmed Judge Wong continues to exercise all powers. No court has removed him from office.



Q3: WHAT IS THE LEGAL CASE?

Q4: WHAT ARE THE COUNTY BUDGET BUDGET RISKS?

The County Attorney's quo warranto proceeding asks the court to decide his authority. A hearing and trial are scheduled for Oct & Nov 2026.

Non-attendance by some Commissioners risks a quorum to set tax rates. Delays threaten up to \$21M in revenue, employee Cost of Living Adjustment, and projects.

THE COURTS WILL
DECIDE THE LEGAL
CASE.
FORT BEND
COUNTY STILL
HAS TO GOVERN.

THREE THINGS FORT BEND RESIDENTS SHOULD KNOW

1. DANIEL WONG REMAINS COUNTY JUDGE TODAY.
No court has ordered his removal, and he continues exercising the authority of the office.
2. THE FINAL LEGAL QUESTION IS STILL PENDING.
A hearing is scheduled for October 16, with trial scheduled for November 10 if necessary.
3. COUNTY GOVERNMENT CANNOT SIMPLY WAIT.
Roads must be maintained. Emergency services must function. Employees must be paid. Infrastructure projects must proceed. And the county must complete its annual budget and tax-rate process.

Know the facts. Follow the proceedings. Participate in the democratic process. Information compiled from publicly reported court proceedings, court documents and Fort Bend County budget proceedings. Legal proceedings remain pending, and future court rulings may change the status described above.

www.DanielOWong.com

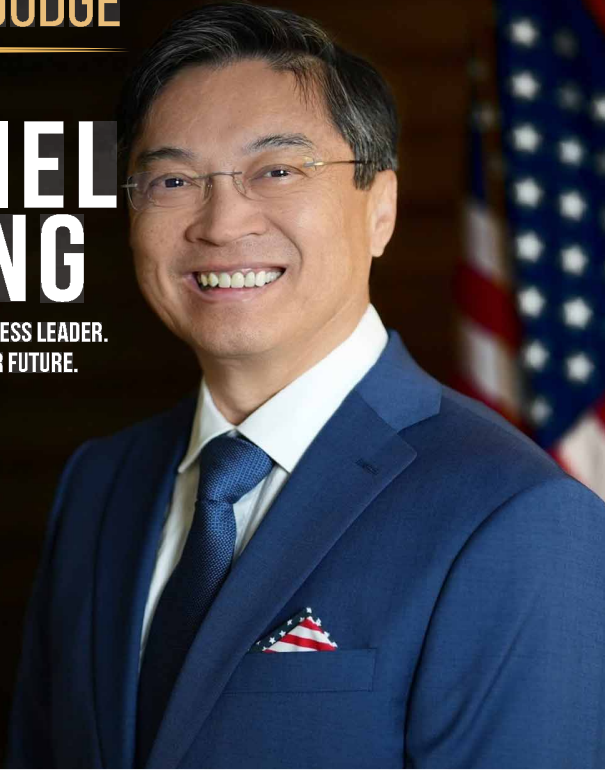
Pol Ad Paid for by Daniel Wong Campaign

FORT BEND
COUNTY JUDGE

★

DANIEL
WONG

ENGINEER AND BUSINESS LEADER.
FOCUSED ON YOUR FUTURE.



“Bring Government Closer to the People”: Overseas Pakistanis Back New Province Resolution

Overseas Pakistanis gathered in Sugar Land for a major Houston convention hosted by community leaders Shakeel Khan and Amir Zaidi, where speakers including Tanweer Ahmed, M.J. Khan, PAGH General Secretary Amir Zaidi and PAGH Director Mehmood Ahmed discussed Pakistan’s growing population, governance challenges and the need for stronger administrative systems. The convention approved a resolution calling for a new province, with participants saying smaller administrative units could improve governance, resource distribution & the delivery of education, healthcare, employment and other basic services.



Love and Reverence for Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

Mark Eid Milad Celebration at Makkah Masjid

Houston’s Muslim community gathered at Makkah Masjid Dairy Ashford to commemorate Eid Milad-un-Nabi ﷺ. Shaikh-ul-Hadees Mufti Muhammad Abu Bakar Siddiq Shazli delivered a special sermon highlighting the life, character and teachings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, while Custodian Abdul Awaisi also addressed the gathering and emphasized the importance of following the Prophet’s ﷺ teachings. The program concluded with Abdul Awaisi leading a special dua for the unity, peace and prosperity of the Muslim Ummah and the Houston community.



Unlearning the hustle

Stepping away from a relentless work culture is sometimes the only way to reclaim health, creativity and sense of self



It's nothing life-threatening," he told me. "You've got gastritis and a neck spasm. You'll need to reduce your exposure to stress. It's fairly common in your line of work

By Taha Kehar

Few would have known it, but when I quit my full-time job as a journalist over seven years ago, I was driven by a peculiar, almost idealistic, quest for stability. This may seem like a paradoxical claim since gainful employment is typically regarded as the most reliable gateway to financial security.

In a fragile economic order, jobs are sacred, a blessing one can't abandon so easily. Without work, it is difficult to imagine how anyone can put two square meals on the table. Yet, it was my job that was steadily depleting me, pushing me into a dark cave I'd never envisaged myself in.

The situation hadn't always been so dire. Work had once been the panacea to my distress. A demanding, deadline-driven career as an editor was nothing short of a dream. Unlike most people, I had the distinct privilege of entering a profession that brought me closer to my passion. Since childhood, I was drawn to the magnetism of the written word. Scrawling poems and stories into diaries became my favoured pastime, a creative pursuit that entertained and challenged me in equal measure. Words weren't just my plaything; they were the clay I moulded into different shapes to make sense of the world. Not many people can understand this affinity, especially in a South Asian milieu where creative writing isn't perceived as a traditional career path.

Owing to the limited possibilities others imagined for my future, I found myself at a prestigious law school. At first, I succumbed to social pressure and wholeheartedly accepted that I was destined to join the legal profession. However, my passion for writing continued to beckon me each time I browsed through the pages of the heavy tomes I was expected to read as part of my course. I found a strange kinship with the printed words in those books; they solidified my belief that I would be nothing but a misfit as a lawyer in a black coat.

After completing my degree, I shifted my focus to journalism in the hope of reconnecting with those words. Instead of venturing into the perilous playground of news reporting, I casually slid into the ivory tower of an editorial desk. Mercifully, I wasn't denied entry and soon found my second home at a newspaper office.

I derived an unusual thrill from the mundane tasks associated with my role as a subeditor. In retrospect, I wasn't just a glorified housekeeper with a curious attention to grammar. Every day, I read through a slew of news stories with an attentive yet critical eye, polishing them until the prose sparkled with purpose. The expertise of a design team helped me watch those edited pieces take on a life of their own on dummy newspaper pages, which I proofread with a child-like devotion.

It was the career I had always imagined for myself, but no dream lasts forever. Have you ever noticed how dreams seem more vivid, bleak and threatening mere minutes before we are about to awaken? Something similar happened to me four years after I became a journalist, but my mind wasn't yet aware of it. Instead, it was the rest of my body that began sounding the alarm bells and protesting on behalf of the mind.

The first symptoms arrived subtly, but were impossible to ignore. An unyielding stiffness settled into my neck, making it difficult for me to tilt or turn my head. A sharp, stabbing pain radiated through my shoulders, across my upper back and into the base of my skull. Soon afterwards, an uncomfortable distension rippled through my gut, accompanied by a racing heartbeat that was difficult to tame.

In March 2018, I made a frantic trip to the emergency room, convinced that I was a step closer to death. "It's nothing life-threatening," he told me. "You've got gastritis and a neck spasm. You'll need to reduce your exposure to stress. It's fairly common in your line of work."

Knowing the enemy doesn't bring us any closer to defeating it. For the next eleven months, I learnt to live with those nerve-racking symptoms while continuing to revel in my work.

At the same time, I found myself reflecting on the subliminal messages my body was trying to convey to me through these ailments. After a prolonged period of introspection, I realised that in the restless pursuit of career milestones, I had allowed my ambition to eclipse my body's needs. My body was exhausted, but this wasn't the kind of fatigue that can be overcome by a power nap or



a good night's rest. Rest, it soon dawned on me, wasn't about sleep. Instead, it is rooted in other activities and stimuli.

In her insightful book *Sacred Rest: Recover Your Life, Renew Your Energy, Restore Your Sanity*, internal medicine physician Sandra Dalton Smith examines how people can experience seven different types of exhaustion.

Each form of fatigue requires a different remedy. Physical exhaustion, which falls neatly within the conventional definition of tiredness, can be alleviated through sleep or relaxation. Mental fatigue stems from cognitive overload and is best addressed by temporarily detaching ourselves from the source of our distress. Emotional exhaustion often arises from incessant people-pleasing, which compels many of us to disregard our personal boundaries and stifle our true feelings.

Sensory fatigue is a consequence of excessive exposure to noise, bright lights and digital screens, resulting in overstimulation that can only be eased by reducing such stimuli. Spiritual exhaustion can be countered through prayer, meditation or reflection, which can help us discover meaning in the seemingly mundane. Social fatigue arises when we are surrounded by toxic relationships and must limit contact with those who drain our emotional energy. Creative fatigue is a reminder that our minds need to renew themselves through art, music or pursuits that restore inspiration or awaken our sense of wonder.

I didn't know any of this in such vivid detail, for such insights weren't ingrained in the hearts and minds of us 'nineties kids'. All I knew was that my mind needed to rest. Curiously enough, I wasn't sleep-deprived; I simply craved a different kind of restoration. I couldn't find a remedy for my malaise without first understanding its source. I don't believe in senseless blame-games, but soon discovered that the path to healing begins with identifying the adversary. After much reflection, I concluded that my millennial work ethic was partly to blame for my afflictions.

At first, this seemed like an odd conclusion since I had explicitly refused to identify as a millennial and, thereby, rejected simplistic stereotypes based on age. Yet, I couldn't deny the pernicious influence of the millennial values that had quietly seeped into my consciousness. Like most millennials, I, too, had internalised the belief that hard work opens the portal to stability.

I had pursued the conventional markers of success, convinced that they would steer me towards a kind of professional nirvana. I never hesitated to work long hours. Even now, I recall – with a heady mix of pride and disbelief, not regret – working 40 days without taking a single day off. Those were the days when I thought unwavering dedication to one's craft could erase all obstacles. The desire to become a proverbial 'jack of all trades' seemed attainable, even if it meant I had to compromise on free time to improve upon my skill set.

Fuelled by an almost naive perception of my invincibility, I came to regard rest as a luxury rather than a necessity. In a world driven by the 'hustle culture', the desire to pause and reflect felt like a weakness, one that would attract harsh scrutiny and compel the world to perceive me as lazy or without ambition. I dreaded the implications associated with these labels. These impressions weren't just fleeting judgments; they could easily morph into the defining markers of one's identity.

All these cherished notions seemed deeply flawed after my minor health scare. It gradually dawned on me that, as I robotically fulfilled my duties as a productive worker, I had stopped seeing myself as a human being. My body was operating like a machine, carrying out one task after another at a relentless pace. Yet, even heavy machinery cannot function continuously; it, too, needs a momentary reprieve. I was holding myself to an unrealistic standard of productivity, not out of an earnest desire to earn praise from my supervisors but because I was consumed by the fear of being left behind.

Once I realised that my relationship with work had to change, I struggled to make all the necessary adjustments to my lifestyle. Unlearning old habits requires us to accept that past patterns aren't



I came to regard rest as a luxury rather than a necessity. In a world driven by the 'hustle culture', the desire to pause and reflect felt like a weakness, one that would attract harsh scrutiny and compel the world to perceive me as lazy or without ambition

healthy. I recognised my mistakes, but couldn't summon the strength to admit them to anyone. Publicising our failures often presents us in an unfavourable light. Not only do we fall in other people's estimation, but we also fall on our own. Ashamed of my own inadequacies, I didn't want my vulnerabilities to be exposed before those who might silently judge me for being overly sensitive.

Not everyone would understand that my body's desire for rest was possibly connected to the occupational hazards of working in the media, where journalists are the first to process traumatic events, sometimes even before the public hears about them. It can take years to grow accustomed to the rawness and brutality of tragic news stories. My senior colleagues weren't apathetic; they had simply mastered the art of detaching themselves from the chaos of our profession.

Fortunately, these internal struggles weren't impeding the quality of my work, so I felt no compulsion to discuss them with anyone. Yet, they were ubiquitous, holding me in a tight embrace and threatening to assail me.

Hoping that time would transform me into a battle-hardened journalist I was expected to become, I continued with the rhythm of my professional life and occasionally sought comfort in convenient distractions. I read novels and wrote short reviews about them on Instagram. This strategy helped me find solace in fictional landscapes and reaffirm my abiding love for literature. Yet, it felt like an escapist fantasy and confirmed my belief that the story of my life had to be rewritten.

At the same time, I binge-watched Netflix series, hoping to expunge all traces of discomfort from my mind and find some doorway to peace. This, too, proved futile because I was relying on a superficial remedy to tackle a crisis that required tangible action.

At long last, I mustered the courage to quit my job, citing my desire to write fiction on a full-time basis and involve myself in my family business. However, the millennial within me was a fiery beast, reluctant to be tamed at any cost.

I couldn't envisage the possibility of living without an income and quickly accepted a position to teach part-time at a university. Leaving a well-paying career in the media for a less lucrative teaching position required a trade-off between priorities. Driven by the instinct of self-preservation, I chose rest over the rigour and intensity of a relentless work routine, not because I regarded it as a luxury, but because I had finally come to understand that it was a necessary ingredient to prevent myself from going adrift.

Over the years, I've tried to achieve a fine balance between work commitments and personal priorities. Every day, I set aside a few hours in the morning to write and prepare my lessons. I've trained myself not to harbour any regrets if work doesn't go as planned. At the same time, I don't attempt to be overzealous by setting ambitious and unrealistic goals for myself. The neck spasms and stomach ailments have steadily dissipated. The symptoms resurface only when I overextend myself, which, unfortunately, seems to happen quite often. Life rarely permits us the opportunity to step back and reflect; it simply propels us forward at a dizzying pace.

The desire to make more money often steers me towards taking on a heavier teaching load than I can manage. In those fraught moments, I have to remind myself of how important it is to allow my psychological, spiritual and emotional needs to assume centre stage. In addition to an evening walk, I try to revel in occasional spells of silence in which I read, pray, journal and listen to music. When I inhabit this cocoon, my sole purpose is to transport myself into a more pleasant state of mind. Now, I view these activities as short vacations that pull me out of a stressful routine. They serve as a regular reminder that rest can't take a backseat to our relentless pursuit of money in an inherently capitalist world.

The writer is a critically acclaimed author

All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writer.

US expands immigration enforcement into domestic air travel

Continued from front page

of Homeland Security (DHS) warning undocumented immigrants against domestic air travel unless they intend to leave the country.

DHS told CNN it is moving away from a Biden-era policy that permitted domestic flights by people without lawful status, amid reports from attorneys and airline staff of a growing presence by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at airports.

The shift extends enforcement well beyond borders and workplaces: airports offer predictable locations, passenger manifests, and traveler data useful for locating people.

Lawyers told CNN that airport arrests appear to be rising as ICE works toward a reported goal of about 2,000 arrests a day, and some are advising clients without secure status to avoid flying.

Passenger data is central to the strategy.

A data-sharing agreement between the Transportation Security Administration and ICE lets immigration authorities obtain traveler information, and documents released through litigation indicate it can be used to identify people before they reach an airport.

TIME reported that ICE agents in Colorado, Texas, and Arizona had approached airline workers for help locating passengers and, in some cases, entering restricted areas — with procedures often unclear.

Recent cases show the stakes: an Ecuadorian woman with a pending immigration process was detained at Phoenix airport while traveling with her U.S.-citizen husband, and an Argentine traveler was held at Philadelphia while heading to a World Cup match, in a dispute over her status.

The policy raises questions about how authorities distinguish between final removal orders, visa overstays, and pending applications, and the American Civil Liberties Union has urged noncitizens without secure status to weigh the risks of even domestic travel.

Abbott targets Texas airport prayer-washing rooms, drawing outcry

Continued from front page

airports as potentially discriminatory, a move Muslim advocates say wrongly targets a basic religious accommodation.

In a letter to the department, Abbott sought a review of the washing facilities at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport and Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport, arguing that because the airports receive federal funds, they must comply with anti-discrimination law.

Ablution is the ritual washing many Muslims perform before daily prayers, cleaning the face, arms, and feet. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in Texas called the intervention an “anti-

Muslim political stunt,” saying the facilities are open to anyone and simply happen to be used mostly by Muslim travelers — no different in principle from other public accommodations.

Abbott had already referred the airports to U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy and threatened to withdraw state funding; afterward, Dallas Fort Worth dropped plans to install additional facilities.

For Muslim travelers, advocates say, access to a place to perform ablution can determine whether they can observe their faith while moving through large transit systems.

The dispute fits a wider pattern of political pressure on Muslims and their institutions. Texas and Florida Republicans have moved to brand CAIR — a vocal critic of the administration's immigration policies and its response to Palestinian advocacy — as a terrorist group, a claim the organization rejects.

Texas is home to more than 300,000 Muslims.

Experts say turning a routine religious accommodation into a federal investigation signals that ordinary Muslim practices are inherently suspect, rather than part of serving a diverse public.

Mayor Mamdani opposes NYC event with leader of India's Hindu nationalist group

Continued from front page

he did not support an upcoming event in his city featuring the leader of the Hindu nationalist group that is the ideological parent of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is scheduled to speak at a Manhattan event on Saturday, according to the event's website.

“I don't support the rally, but I don't know if the city has any jurisdiction on cancelling a private event,” Mamdani, who is the first Muslim and Indian American mayor of New York City, said when asked if the event should be cancelled.

“The vision of India that I was taught by my family and one that I grew up being very familiar with was of a pluralistic society of a secular Republic that believed in the belonging of each and every person who was from India. And it has been incredibly troubling to see the rise of a movement that is predicated on an exclusionary vision.”

The event's website casts the August 29 gathering as the “Universal Oneness Celebration” bringing together the Hindu American community.

The organisers, American Hindus for Engagement and Dialogue, say the event is backed by several Hindu American groups and promotes shared heritage and interfaith unity. Many local organisations have criticised it over Bhagwat's attendance and the RSS' history.

The RSS, a powerful Hindu group from which Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP emerged, said in May it had organised foreign visits, including to the US, to counter perceptions it is a paramilitary outfit

involved in attacks on minority communities.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom says the RSS “has been involved in acts of extreme violence and intolerance against members of minority groups for decades”.

The RSS disputes intolerance accusations and says it is a “Hindu-centric civilisational, cultural movement” whose goal is to “carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory”, including by uniting Hindus.

United Nations and human rights groups say abuse of Indian minorities has risen in recent years, pointing to rising hate speeches, a religion-based citizenship law, the demolition of Muslim-owned properties, the removal of occupied Kashmir's autonomy and an anti-conversion legislation that challenges freedom of belief.

The BJP-led Indian government denies being discriminatory and says its policies, including food subsidy programmes and electrification drives, benefit all communities.

US pauses immigrant visa applications worldwide

Continued from front page

The move marks another step in the Trump administration's signature drive to reduce immigration into the United States.

Applicants with scheduled interviews at US embassies and consulates received emails saying their appointments were being rescheduled and that they would receive notice of new dates and times.

“A more prosperous America means ensuring that visa applicants are not likely to become a public charge, as defined under US law and regulation, and not likely to become dependent on US public benefits reserved for qualified Americans in need,” a State Department spokesperson told the FT.

The department this month launched “a global training initiative” to “ensure all consular officers are fully equipped to evaluate every visa applicant comprehensively and consistently,” the spokesperson said.

Brian Simmons, senior US consular manager at immigration law firm Fragomen in Washington, said many affected applicants had “already spent thousands of dollars and disrupted their lives to attend scheduled interviews, only to have their appointments cancelled at the last minute”.

The State Department did not say when appointments would resume, saying: “To accommodate this in-depth training, appointments for visa services will be adjusted.”

A privilege, not a right

The US government plans to revoke the visas of foreigners who came to the country for tourism or business but sought to stay longer by applying for asylum, the State Department said on Tuesday.

The administration said it is now working with the Department of Homeland Security to identify and revoke the visas of people who, it said, came to America billing themselves as temporary visitors but then applied for asylum so they could stay permanently.

“Obtaining a visa in order to seek

asylum is fraud — which is grounds for visa revocation,” State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott said in a statement that confirmed press reports about the new policy.

The White House, in a post on X, suggested “up to two hundred thousand visas” would be affected and claimed it would be the “largest mass visa revocation in history”.

The State Department neither confirmed nor denied that number.

Pigott said, “The number of revocations remains dynamic and will be done on a rolling basis.”

Early this month, the department said that since President Donald Trump returned to power in January 2025, some 175,000 foreigners had seen their US visas revoked on grounds ranging from criminal offences, including driving under the influence, to praising the killing of the right-wing activist Charlie Kirk.

The administration also recently revoked the visas of Mexican officials, including the son of the former president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. This prompted a complaint from the current president, Claudia Sheinbaum.

Trump, who won reelection in large part on his promise to fight illegal immigration, has expelled huge numbers of people who were in the country without proper residence papers.

But he has also worked to restrict the entry of foreigners who do go by the rules and has gone after those who overstay their visas after they expire.

Some of these measures have been challenged and curtailed by the courts.

Last Friday, a federal judge struck down a government ban on visas to nationals from 75 countries who wish to settle in the country indefinitely.

These countries included Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, Thailand and Yemen.

The Trump administration is also planning to expand vetting of the social media accounts of visa applicants.

“We are making clear that a visa is a privilege — not a right,” Pigott said on Tuesday.

What are US H-1B visas for skilled workers and what changes loom?

Continued from front page

crackdown since taking office last year, has lambasted the programme and wants to permanently raise the fee from between \$2,000 and \$5,000 to more than \$100,000.

Despite criticism that some companies use the visas to hire lower-paid foreign workers instead of Americans, business groups and companies say they help recruit highly skilled professionals and address a lack of qualified US workers in some industries.

The visas, established by Congress in 1990, are especially critical for tech companies seeking to recruit from India and China. Consultancy companies such as Deloitte, PwC and Ernst & Young as well as outsourcing giants such as Tata Consultancy Services,

Infosys, HCL Tech and LTIMindtree are also top H-1B sponsors.

Here are more details about the programme and what changes are happening under the Trump administration

Who is fighting over the fees?

Trump last year dramatically raised the cost of H-1B visas to \$100,000, prompting several lawsuits. While his initial fee increase is set to expire in September, the Department of Homeland Security this week proposed raising it to a permanent \$103,265.

A group representing India's technology industry has said it is engaging with US stakeholders over the proposed increase, and urged the administration to consider the benefits it offers companies seeking to temporarily address worker shortages.

Tesla, Amazon, OpenAI and other companies have all faced questions over their H-1B visa use, especially amid US layoffs and a tighter job market facing American workers.

Could existing lawsuits challenge the new rule?

A Boston-based appeals court is reviewing a June decision by a federal judge who ruled that the fee was illegal and blocked the Trump administration from collecting it.

Another court is also considering whether a judge properly rejected a challenge to the fee by the US Chamber of Commerce, the largest US business lobbying group.

Democratic-led states as well as a coalition of unions and employers have also filed lawsuits. The pending legal cases could be amended to challenge this week's proposed rule after it is finalized.

How is enhanced vetting hitting employers?

Changes to how potential visa holders are scrutinised and processed have impacted companies' hiring and expansion plans, with some top H-1B users, such as Google, moving to increase operations in India.

Trump's administration in December said it would increase its vetting of H-1B applicants with a particular focus on what it deemed censorship and free speech.

The State Department ordered US consulates to scrutinise the applicants' LinkedIn profiles and resumes as well as those of any accompanying family members for all visa applicants but particularly those with technology backgrounds seeking H-1Bs who may have been “involved in the suppression of protected expression.”

How are registration numbers being impacted?

The H-1B programme offers 65,000 visas annually, with another 20,000 for workers with advanced degrees, typically granted for three years and renewable to six.

As of late February, about 70 employers had paid the \$100,000 fee on a total of 85 visa applications, court filings show. Employers last year registered for about 344,000 H-1B visas, down more than 25 per cent from 2024 and fewer than half of the 759,000 visas sought in 2023, data from US Citizenship and Immigration Services shows.

Pakistan expects US reply on \$10b stabilisation facility 'soon'

Continued from front page

US over the proposed facility had been “constructive”.

“The proposed US stabilisation facility would also serve as a potential backstop and confidence signal, supporting market access and helping crowd in private capital,” Schehzad said.

Pakistan had approached US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent last month, seeking a Bilateral Exchange Stabilisation Support Facility with a maturity of up to five years, according to a Reuters report.

Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb confirmed the request last week, saying the proposed arrangement was aimed at providing a signal of stability for the currency and foreign exchange market rather than functioning as a conventional loan or credit facility.

“This is not about a credit line or a loan or whatever. This is a signal about our currency stability, a signal about exchange rate stability, and that in turn allows us to go to the markets to raise debt,” said Aurangzeb, clearing the air about the \$10 billion facility.

Aurangzeb said the request was under consideration by the US Treasury Department, with progress expected by September. If approved, the facility could provide additional financial support to Pakistan as the cash-strapped economy works to strengthen its external position.

The request follows Pakistan's role in brokering talks over the Iran war, which raised its diplomatic profile and stirred hopes that it could seek economic gains from Washington and other partners.

In the request to US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Islamabad is seeking a Bilateral Exchange Stabilization Support Facility between the US and the Pakistani government worth \$10 billion with a maturity of up to five years.

The facility, if agreed to, would bolster Pakistan's reserves, ease pressure on the rupee and reduce its reliance on multilateral financing, even as Islamabad undertakes tighter fiscal and monetary policies in line with its International Monetary Fund programme.

Pakistan remains under \$7 billion IMF discipline that has required politically unpopular tax increases, spending restraint and reforms.

Also, Moody's on Monday upgraded Pakistan to B3 rating but said that international surveys continue to point to weak rule of law and control of corruption and limited government effectiveness.

The agency has given a highly speculative rating of B3, which is seven notches below the investment grade. Moody's upgraded Pakistan from Caa1, which is a substantial risk rating.

14 infants killed in fire at Pims' gynae ward in Islamabad

ISLAMABAD:

Fourteen newborn babies were killed on Wednesday after a fire broke out on the third floor of the Mother and Child Hospital's ward at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) Hospital.

According to the district administration, the fire broke out in the hospital's nursery and rescue teams reached the site immediately after being alerted.

The Capital Emergency Service (CES) and Capital Development Authority (CDA) fire department said they responded to the fire and brought the blaze under control. According to the CDA, the fire emergency was reported at around 6:45am, with fire brigade and rescue teams reaching the scene within seven minutes.

Six fire engines and four ambulances took part in the rescue operation. The CDA said FS-01 and FS-05 fire tenders, rescue teams, CES ambulances and the ICT administration were deployed during the response. Cooling operations and an assessment of the site were also completed after the fire was brought under control.

According to the PIMS spokesperson, fifteen newborn infants were in the ward at the time of the fire. Fourteen suffered severe burns and later died, while one child survived and was rescued.

The spokesperson said that all the bodies of the deceased children had been handed over to their families.

PM suspends health secretary
Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif chaired an emergency meeting and ordered the “strictest action”, according to a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

The prime minister expressed strong displeasure over the incident and suspended Health Secretary Aslam Ghori, asking him to leave the meeting, the PMO said.

PM Shehbaz also expressed his condolences to the parents of the newborns who died in the fire.

“My heart is deeply saddened by this tragic incident. We share the parents' grief. May Allah Almighty grant the bereaved families patience,” the prime minister said.

The PMO said an inquiry committee formed by the prime minister to conduct a high-level investigation into the incident had begun its work.

“Former interior secretary Shahid Khan will head the committee, while Establishment Secretary Dr Barrister Nabeel Awan will serve as a member,” according to the PMO.

Earlier, sources said the prime minister had summoned senior officials of the Ministry of Health to the Prime Minister's House for an emergency meeting following the incident.

PM Shehbaz had also directed Health Minister Mustafa Kamal to reach Islamabad immediately, visit PIMS to assess the situation and submit a report, sources said.

Notification issued to probe PIMS fire

Later, a notification was issued at the prime minister's direction to constitute a high-level inquiry committee.

Retired federal secretary Shahid Khan was appointed chairman of the

committee, while retired Major General Dr Khurshid Utra, Dr Barrister Nabeel Ahmed Awan and the deputy commissioner of Islamabad were named as its members.

The committee will determine the immediate cause of the fire and establish a timeline of the incident. It will also review the emergency response and rescue operations by hospital staff, the fire brigade, Rescue 1122 and other relevant agencies.

It will examine compliance with emergency standard operating procedures for the evacuation of newborn babies, particularly high-risk neonates.

The committee will conduct a detailed review of the fire-safety infrastructure at PIMS and compliance with safety regulations. It will also determine responsibility and any negligence on the part of individuals involved in the incident.

The committee will recommend necessary reforms to PIMS' administrative system to prevent similar incidents in the future.

According to the terms of reference laid out in the notification, the committee will submit an interim report to the prime minister within 48 hours, containing recommendations requiring immediate action.

It will submit a comprehensive report containing the findings of the inquiry and actionable recommendations within five days.

The Ministry of National Health Services has been directed to immediately notify the inquiry committee and provide it with the necessary assistance.

Spark triggered PIMS nursery fire, preliminary report says

A preliminary report into the fire at the MCH Nursery of the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) said a spark triggered the blaze early on Wednesday, which spread rapidly and resulted in the loss of neonatal lives.

According to a report shared by the PIMS spokesperson, the fire broke out at around 6:38am on Aug 26, 2026, after a spark inside the nursery triggered a massive blaze that erupted within seconds due to the oxygen points at each incubator.

The report said two doctors and two nurses on duty were inside the nursery when the fire broke out. They immediately responded and called security staff for assistance, who joined efforts to evacuate the babies. The staff made two attempts to enter the nursery and rescue the infants.

At around 6:39am, a huge blast occurred, causing the ceilings to collapse, according to the report. Duty staff managed to rescue one baby from the nursery and four babies from an adjacent room, along with three mothers.

The staff also rescued 73 other admitted patients from the adjacent Gynae ward on the same floor within minutes, the report said.

All available fire safety equipment, including 35 fire extinguishers, was used by the staff to contain the fire. The report said all emergency exits were fully open and operational.

“Our prayers and deepest sympathies are with the bereaved families—every human life is precious, and every newborn represents hope and a future,” the spokesperson said.

The PIMS spokesperson said its

doctors, nurses and staff worked tirelessly every day to save lives, often under tremendous pressure.

“The incident is being transparently investigated at different forums, and the findings are awaited,” the spokesperson said.

PIMS expressed its deepest condolences to the families who suffered the loss and acknowledged the efforts of its staff and emergency responders, saying they responded to the incident and helped prevent further loss of life and property.

Ministers speak to the media
Speaking to the media, Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Tariq Fazl Chaudhry said the fire spread because of gas lines and plastic equipment in the ward. “The cause of the fire cannot be determined at this stage,” Chaudhry said, adding that the crime scene was being examined.

“Regardless of how the explosion occurred, the fire spread because of the oxygen supply,” he said. Chaudhry said two doctors, a nurse and other staff members were present in the ward at the time of the incident and remained safe.

Earlier, Health Minister Mustafa Kamal said the blaze was caused by an explosion in an air-conditioning unit in the children's intensive care ward.

“The presence of oxygen in the ward caused the fire to intensify. As a result, 14 innocent children lost their lives,” he added.

Kamal said relevant administrative and enforcement agencies had reached the site to determine the cause of the incident and establish the facts.

The health secretary and officials from the Ministry of Health are also present at PIMS, according to the minister.

“The loss of the lives of innocent newborn babies is an extremely heart-breaking tragedy,” Kamal said.

Later, Minister of State for Interior Talal Chaudhry, who visited PIMS on the special instructions of Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, said the rescue operation was completed in a timely and effective manner.

He said rescue teams reached the site within six to seven minutes of being alerted and immediately began operations, while all relevant administrative officers remained at the scene until the rescue operation was completed.

Chaudhry said strict action would be taken against those found responsible for negligence in the tragic incident. “Those involved in the incident will be given the harshest punishment in accordance with the law,” he said.

He said the complete rescue operation report had been sent to the interior minister and PM Shehbaz. “The investigation into the incident and the process of determining those responsible is ongoing,” Chaudhry said.

Fact-finding committee constituted

Meanwhile, the Islamabad district administration constituted a fact-finding committee to determine the exact cause of the fire and examine the factors that contributed to its spread. The committee will be headed by the Additional Deputy Commissioner (General), ICT, and will include officials from the Capital Development Authority, Islamabad Police, IESCO, PIMS and Capital Emergency Services.

The committee was also tasked with assessing whether adequate and functional fire-safety measures were in place and evaluating the response time and effectiveness of the rescue and firefighting operations. It has been directed to submit its report within 24 hours.

Meanwhile, Minister of State for Law Barrister Aqeel Malik expressed deep grief over the deaths of 14 newborn babies in the PIMS fire, describing the incident as “extremely heart-breaking and unbearable”.

Convention Approves Resolution Calling for New Province in Pakistan

Continued from front page

services closer to the people.

Held under the banner of Pakistan Bachao Tehreek – Voice of Overseas Pakistanis, the convention was hosted by community leaders Shakeel Khan and Amir Zaidi on August 21, 2026, in Sugar Land, Texas. A large number of Pakistani-American community members attended the gathering to discuss Pakistan's development, prosperity and the challenges facing the country.

Among the speakers were business tycoon Tanweer Ahmed, community leaders Shakil Khan and M.J. Khan, Pakistan Association of Greater Houston (PAGH) General Secretary Amir Zaidi, and PAGH Director Mehmood Ahmed.

During the convention, speakers highlighted Pakistan's rapidly growing population and the increasing need for effective delivery of education, healthcare, employment opportunities, infrastructure and other basic facilities. They stressed that strengthening the administrative system and transferring decision-making powers closer to the people could make governance more responsive and effective.

A major focus of the convention was the proposal for the creation of additional provinces in Pakistan. Participants said relatively smaller provinces could improve administration, accelerate decision-making, facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources and help address public issues more efficiently.

The resolution approved at the convention called for the establishment of a new province, reflecting the participants' view that Pakistan's administrative structure should evolve in line with its growing population and changing needs.

Speakers emphasized that the creation of additional provinces should not simply be regarded as a geographical division. They said the primary objective should be better governance, effective resource utilization, improved public services and bringing government closer to ordinary citizens.

The participants also discussed the role of overseas Pakistanis in contributing to the country's economic development, stability and prosperity and expressed their desire to remain engaged with issues concerning Pakistan.

The convention concluded with participants reaffirming their commitment to Pakistan's progress and stability and paying tribute to the services and sacrifices of the Pakistan Armed Forces in defending the country.

Houston Emerges as a Hub for Pakistani and Indian Cuisine

HOUSTON, TX — With one of the largest South Asian communities in the United States, Houston has steadily grown into a major destination for Pakistani, Indian, and Indo-Pak cuisine. From Hillcroft Avenue to Sugar Land and Katy, dozens of restaurants now offer everything from traditional home-style meals to fine dining, street food, and vegetarian buffets.

A Strong Pakistani Culinary Presence

Pakistani restaurants in Houston are especially known for their rich curries, slow-cooked dishes, and barbecue. Aga’s Restaurant & Catering on Wilcrest Drive continues to be one of the city’s most popular desi dining spots, widely recognized for its biryani, nihari, karahi, and grilled meats. Nearby, Savoy Restaurant, Himalaya, and Javed Nihari have long served authentic Pakistani flavors, attracting

diners from across the metropolitan area.

In Sugar Land and surrounding suburbs, restaurants such as Lasbela Restaurant, Mai Colachi, Karahi Boys, and Bar-B-Q Tonight have further expanded the reach of Pakistani cuisine, offering halal BBQ, karahi, and traditional curries in family-friendly settings. Casual eateries like Maza Pakistani Grill, Bismillah Restaurant & Cafe, and Khan BBQ & Grill cater to both dine-in and takeout customers.

Food trucks and cafés, including Pak-Man, Chai Shai, and Meerut BBQ House, have also gained popularity for bringing Pakistani street food, tea culture, and late-night barbecue to Houston’s food scene.

Indian Restaurants Offer Regional Diversity

Indian cuisine in Houston reflects a wide range

of regional traditions. North Indian and Punjabi-style restaurants such as Kiran’s, India’s Restaurant – A Taste of Paradise, and Nirvana Indian Restaurant offer classic curries, tandoori dishes, and lunch buffets popular with office workers and families.

South Indian and vegetarian dining is well represented along Hillcroft Street, where restaurants like Udipi Café, Shiv Sagar, Govinda’s Vegetarian Cuisine, and Maharaja Bhog specialize in dosas, thalis, and Gujarati or Jain meals. These establishments attract both vegetarian diners and those seeking lighter, traditional fare.

Fine Dining and Modern Fusion

Houston’s South Asian dining scene has also moved into the fine-dining space. Restaurants such as Musaafer, Verandah, Da Gama, and Pondicheri present modern interpretations of Indian and Indo-

Pak cuisine, blending traditional spices with contemporary presentation. These venues have helped bring South Asian food into Houston’s upscale dining conversation.

A Reflection of Community Growth

Most Pakistani and Indian restaurants in Houston offer halal options, and many serve as cultural gathering spaces for families, students, and professionals. The concentration of eateries along Hillcroft, Southwest Freeway, Sugar Land, and West Houston reflects the growth and influence of the Pakistani and Indian communities in the region.

As Houston continues to diversify, its Pakistani and Indian restaurants not only provide authentic food but also contribute to the city’s multicultural identity — making South Asian cuisine an essential part of Houston’s dining landscape.

Here is the list:

Aga’s Restaurant & Catering – 11842 Wilcrest Dr, Houston, TX 77031

. Phone: (832) 786-8000

. Dine-in and takeout; Halal Indo-Pak cuisine. Known for its halal goat chops, beef kebabs and chicken lollipops

, plus classics like biryani and mango lassi.

Lasbela Restaurant & Catering (Sugar Land) – 13849 SW Fwy, Sugar Land, TX 77478

. Phone: (832) 999-4490

. Dine-in/takeout; Pakistani fare. Specialties include rich curries and BBQ – e.g. malai handi chicken, fried fish and kebabs, all Halal.

Khan BBQ & Grill – 17001 W Little York Rd, Houston, TX 77084

. Phone: (832) 593-0110

Pakistani/Indian BBQ and grill (dine-in/takeout). Famous for its tandoori meats and curries – chicken tikka, butter chicken, biryanis, kababs like chapli and nihari, all Halal.

Pak-Man (Food Truck) – Mobile (Houston-area)

. Phone: (832) 915-0898

. Halal Pakistani street food truck. Specializes in fusion “burgers” and South Asian snacks – e.g. biryani bowls, samosa wraps, Pakistani-style sliders

Karahi Boys – 16535 Lexington Blvd Ste 100, Sugar Land, TX 77479

. Phone: (281) 800-5880

Indo-Pak (dine-in/takeout). Offers flavorful Pakistani grills – rich karahi and karahi fries, mixed grills and biryanis

– plus giant naan and spice-forward curries, all Halal.

Bundu Khan Kabab House – 10941 FM 1960 W, Houston, TX 77070

. Phone: (281) 477-7897

. Dine-in/takeout; Pakistani BBQ & Halal. Known for its breakfast specials (halwa puri) and kababs, plus biryanis and curries in a casual setting

Bar BQ Tonight – 14838 Park Row Blvd Ste A, Houston, TX 77084

. Phone: (346) 594-2097

. Dine-in/takeout; Pakistani BBQ/Grill. Serves classic karahi (meat wok), malai boti, beef bihari kababs and other BBQ meats, all Halal.

Mai Colachi – 15425 SW Fwy, Sugar Land, TX 77478

. Phone: (281) 240-0786

. Dine-in; Halal Pakistani/Indian. Upscale BBQ and grill – steaks, tandoori meats and kebabs – and rich curries (mutton karahi, etc.)

“Mouth Watering BBQ, Halal Steaks and Karahi & Curries”

Javed Nihari – 14631 Beechnut St, Houston, TX 77083

. Phone: (346) 330-4240

. Dine-in/takeout; Pakistani. Famous for authentic Nihari (slow-cooked beef stew) and biryanis, plus spicy curries. All halal meats.

Bismillah Restaurant & Cafe – 5696 Hillcroft St, Houston, TX 77036

. Phone: (713) 587-9300

. Pakistani/Indian halal burgers and sandwiches. Known for its “patty melt” burgers and traditional Pakistani bun kebabs on paratha (all Halal).

Chai Shai – 6632 Southwest Fwy, Houston, TX 77074

. Phone: (832) 939-8112

. Dine-in; Pakistani cafe/bakery (tea room). Specialty: Karak tea (“chai shai”), breakfast sandwiches and buns (e.g. “Bun Ka Baap” pork/salwa roll) and South Asian snacks

. Halal meats and sweets.

Maza Pakistani Grill – 15655 JFK Blvd Ste L, Houston, TX 77032

. Phone: (281) 741-2571

. Dine-in/takeout; Pakistani. Offers tandoori grill and curries – chicken tikka, seekh kabab, Butter Chicken, biryani and goat curry. All Halal.

Himalaya Restaurant – 6652 Southwest Fwy, Houston, TX 77074

. Phone: (713) 532-2837

. Dine-in; Indian/Pakistani/Himalayan. Family-style dining with classic curries (palak gosht, goat karahi), biryanis and grilled meats (biryani pictured). Halal.

Mezban – 6655 Harwin Dr Ste A108, Houston, TX 77036

. Phone: (713) 952-0606

. Dine-in; Indian/Pakistani Buffet. All-you-can-eat buffet (Halal) featuring biryanis, kebabs, curries and sides.

Meerut BBQ House (Food Truck) – 11910 S Texas 6, Sugar Land, TX 77498

(Fri–Sat nights). Phone: (346) 667-6308

. Mobile Halal Pakistani BBQ. Grill specialties: chicken tikka, wings, bihari boti, tikka rolls and parathas

DDK Kabab & Grill – 11797 S Hwy 6, Sugar Land, TX 77498

. Phone: (832) 500-4618

. Dine-in; Indian/Pakistani BBQ. Tandoori and grilled specialties (mixed grill, seekh kababs, chicken tikka, goat chops) plus biryanis and curries. All Halal.

Tolo Kabab House – 7555 Bellaire Blvd Ste B, Houston, TX 77036

. Phone: (281) 888-7398

. Dine-in; Afghan/Pakistani. Features Afghan specialties (mantoo dumplings, kabuli pulao, chapli kebabs) and Kabab/Pilaf dishes. Halal.

Shalamar Restaurant – 15142 Highway 3, Webster, TX 77598

. Phone: (281) 488-4151

. Dine-in; Pakistani/Indian. Neighborhood halal eatery serving karahis, biryanis, tikka masala and more

. Friendly ambience with both lunch buffet and a la carte.

Nirvana Indian Restaurant – 14545 Memorial Dr, Houston, TX 77079

. Phone: (281) 496-3232

. Dine-in buffet (Halal) – specializes in all-you-can-eat vegetarian-friendly Indian buffet and seafood specials

. Known for its elaborate buffet thali (notably chicken biryani, palak paneer, aloo gobi, etc.) and casual setting.

Maharaja Bhog – 8338 Southwest Fwy, Houston, TX 77074

. Phone: (713) 771-2464

. Dine-in buffet; Gujarati veg Thali (Indian Vegetarian). All-vegetarian Gujarati/Marwari feast served in unlimited thali – dals, vegetables, chutneys, sweets. Family-style dinner with Jain options available.

Shiv Sagar – 6662 Southwest Fwy, Houston, TX 77074

. Phone: (713) 977-0150

. Dine-in buffet; Indian Vegetarian. Offers Gujarati-style thali buffet and à la carte (e.g. dosas, curries, breads) in a casual family setting.

Govinda’s Vegetarian Cuisine – 1320 W 34th St, Houston, TX 77018

. Phone: (346) 266-1626

. Dine-in buffet (ISKCON temple café); all-vegetarian (vegan-friendly) Indian. Specializes in Jain/South-Indian-

inspired thali buffet and a variety of healthy veggie dishes.

Da Gama – 600 N Shepherd Dr Ste 520, Houston, TX 77007

. Phone: (281) 888-7806

. Dine-in; Indo-Portuguese. “Indian canteen” for modern fusion – small plates of Goan and Anglo-Indian style (pork vindaloo, sausage rolls, tandoori masalas), plus craft cocktails. Creative brunch and lunch offerings.

Surya India – 700 Durham Dr Ste 200, Houston, TX 77007

. Phone: (713) 864-6667

. (Note: This contemporary Indian fine-dining by Chef Sheel Joshi operated near Rice Military.) It was an upscale dining room with modern Indian plates (award-winning chef, halal)

Kiran’s Restaurant – 2925 Richmond Ave Ste 160, Houston, TX 77098

. Phone: (713) 960-8472

. Dine-in; Upscale Indian. Fine dining Punjabi cuisine – tandoori grills (chicken tikka, lamb kababs), rich curries (butter chicken, lamb vindaloo) and innovative fusion dishes (Seafood tandoori platter)

India’s Restaurant – A Taste of Paradise – 5704 Richmond Ave, Houston, TX 77057

. Phone: (713) 266-0131 (also 266-0805)

. Dine-in/buffet; North Indian (vegetarian & non-veg). Long-standing Uptown eatery serving generous lunch buffet and à la carte curries (vegetarian, chicken, mutton), tandoori breads, and Chinese-Indian “desi Chinese” classics.

Mirch Masala – 10758 Cypress Creek Pkwy, Houston, TX 77070

. Phone: (281) 955-9878

. Dine-in/buffet; Indian vegetarian-friendly. All-you-can-eat North Indian buffet (Halal) featuring Gujarati and Rajasthani specialties – biryanis, curries, dal, sambhar, desserts (e.g. ras malai) in a colorful family-style setting

Pondicheri – 2800 Kirby Dr Ste B132, Houston, TX 77098

. Phone: (713) 522-2022

. Dine-in/cafe; Modern Indian fusion. Casual cafe known for creative South-Indian-inspired breakfast/brunch (e.g. masala egg wraps, Belgian waffles with Indian flavors) and lunch plates (Indian-style burgers, thali bowls)

. Uses local ingredients and has bakery items.

Musaafer – 5115 Westheimer Rd Ste C-3500, Houston, TX 77056

. Phone: (713) 242-8087

. Fine-dining Indian (Michelin-rated); Halal. Upscale contemporary Indian cuisine – tasting menus featuring tandoori grills, biryanis and modern “street food” plates. Known for gourmet renditions like lamb chops, butter chicken, and creative desserts.

Verandah – 3300 Kirby Dr Ste 7A, Houston, TX 77098

. Phone: (832) 886-4291

. Dine-in; Indian (Malabar/Coastal). Upscale Indian restaurant (Kirby Collection) offering regional specialties – Kerala shrimp curry, Goan fish curry, biryanis, tandoori grills (Awadhi biryani pictured)

. Creative cocktails and vegetarian options also featured.

Udipi Café – Hillcroft – 5959 Hillcroft St Ste A, Houston, TX 77036

. Phone: (713) 334-5555

. Dine-in buffet; South Indian vegetarian. Casual cafeteria known for all-you-can-eat thali and dosas – specialties include ghee roast dosa, Mysore masala dosa and South Indian banana-leaf thali

. Vegetarian fare (many vegan options) in a lively setting.

Israel renaming Jerusalem landmarks to erase city's Arab identity: governorate



Israeli occupation authorities removed the sign identifying the historic Bab al-Amud Gate in occupied Jerusalem and replaced it with a sign calling it the "Old Gate," in a move targeting the city's Arab names and historical landmarks.

The Jerusalem Governorate said on Wednesday that the Israeli authorities were continuing to rename streets, landmarks and historic sites in Jerusalem as part of a policy aimed at replacing traditional Arab place names with Hebrew ones.

The governorate said that Israeli authorities had installed a sign reading "Old Gate" while removing signs bearing the original name of Bab al-Amoud, also known as the Damascus Gate, one of the best-known entrances to Jerusalem's Old City. According to the governorate, the move was not only an administrative change but part of a broader effort to reshape Jerusalem's urban and cultural landscape and efface historic Arab place names. It said the names of Jerusalem's gates,

streets and landmarks formed part of the city's national, historical and cultural memory, warning that replacing them threatened the city's Arab, Islamic and Christian heritage.

The governorate warned of "continued efforts to alter Jerusalem's historic character", asserting that Israeli attempts to impose new realities would "not erase the city's history or collective memory".

The statement was issued a day after Israel seized the Qalandia Training Centre, run by the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), in occupied East Jerusalem, a move to which Palestinian authorities called for a "firm international response".

East Jerusalem is considered occupied territory under international law.

The international community does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over the historic city, while Palestinians regard East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state.

Several UN resolutions, including Security Council Resolution 478, have rejected measures aimed at changing the character, demographic composition, or political and legal status of Jerusalem.

On March 7, UN experts warned that irreparable harm was being inflicted on Jerusalem, as violence engulfed the region, and genocide against the Palestinians continued in Gaza and spilled into the West Bank.

In a statement, the experts said, "Under the cover of an existential war against the Palestinians, Israel is accelerating measures that alter Jerusalem's demographic composition, religious character and legal status, destroying the remnants of the pluralistic fabric that Jerusalem has represented for centuries, for Muslims, Christians and Jews."



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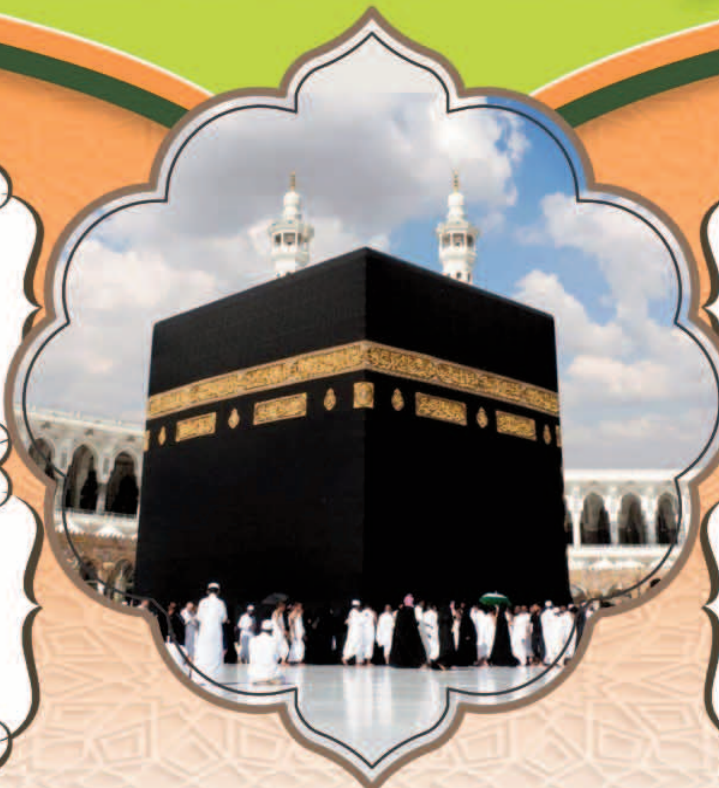
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Submit email with contact info to: zeenatfoundationtx@gmail.com with subject line:

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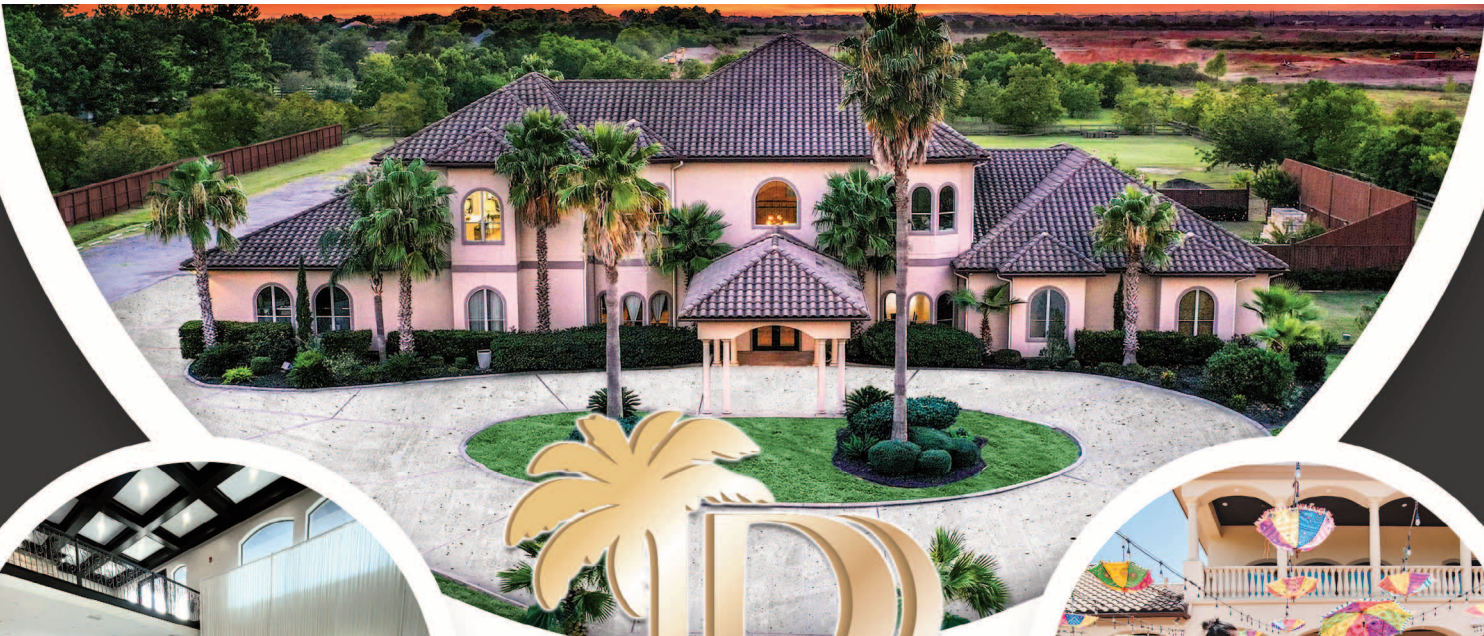
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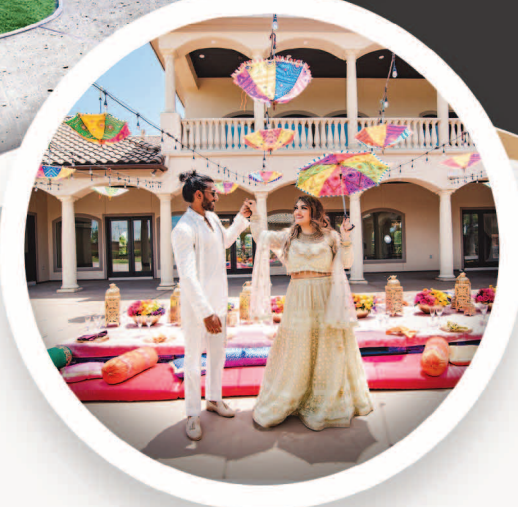












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PAGH General Secretary Expresses Concern Over University Incident in Islamabad



HOUSTON, TX — Aamir Zaidi, General Secretary of the Pakistan Greater Houston Association (PAGH), has expressed deep concern over reported incidents involving disorderly conduct toward a uniformed military officer at an educational institution in Islamabad.

In a press statement issued from Houston, Zaidi stressed the importance of protecting the sanctity and discipline of academic institutions, emphasizing that educational space must remain focused on character building, knowledge, and

Continued on page 28

Spirit of Love and Devotion Fills Makkah Masjid Dairy Ashford on Eid Milad-un-Nabi ﷺ



HOUSTON: Makkah Masjid on Dairy Ashford Road hosted a special religious gathering to commemorate Eid Milad-un-Nabi ﷺ, bringing together members of Houston's Muslim community to honor the blessed birth anniversary of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

The gathering featured religious

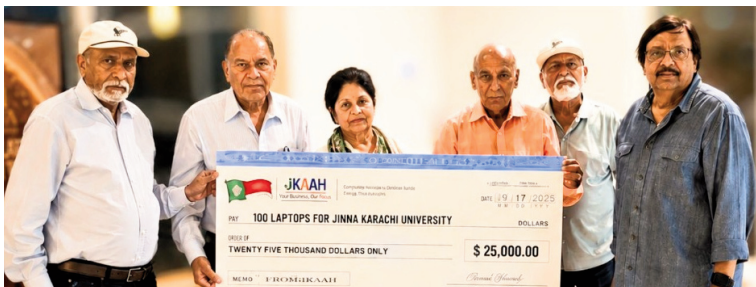
observances, prayers and a special sermon by Shaikh-ul-Hadees Mufti Muhammad Abu Bakar Siddiq Shazli, who spoke at length about the life, character and teachings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

In his address, Mufti Muhammad Abu Bakar Siddiq Shazli emphasized the importance of following the

Sunnah of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and incorporating his teachings into everyday life. He highlighted the Prophet's ﷺ message of compassion, mercy, justice, brotherhood and respect for humanity, urging Muslims to reflect these qualities in their personal lives and within the wider

Continued on page 28

JKAAH Announces \$25,000 Commitment for 100 Laptops for University of Karachi Students



JKAAH head Faheem Akhund and board members display the \$25,000 commitment for 100 laptops for deserving University of Karachi students.

HOUSTON: The Jamia Karachi Alumni Association Houston (JKAAH), headed by Faheem Akhund, has announced a \$25,000 commitment to provide 100 laptops to deserving students of the



JKAAH head Faheem Akhund signs the MoU with then Vice Chancellor of the University of Karachi, Professor Dr. Khalid Iraqi.

University of Karachi, with a formal *Continued on page 28*

Trump administration proposes changes limiting H-1B holders' access to refundable tax credits

The Department of the Treasury and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) issued proposed regulations to apply and clarify federal law regarding eligibility requirements for taxpayer-funded refundable individual income tax credits, according to a press release.

"Under President Trump, the days of illegal aliens collecting taxpayer-funded benefits are over. The federal law is clear, and Treasury is enforcing it," said Treasury Secretary

Scott Bessent. "American taxpayers should not be forced to foot the bill for benefits going to those who are barred by law from receiving them. These proposed regulations end the abuse, protect the integrity of the tax system, and put Americans first."

The administration said the proposed regulations would strengthen enforcement of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

Continued on page 28

USCIS public charge rule takes effect September 18

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has revised the way immigration officers will evaluate whether certain green card applicants could become a "public charge," introducing a broader review of applicants' individual circumstances in place of the Biden-era approach.

The new policy takes effect September 18 and is based on the congressional requirement that immigrants coming to the United States should be self-sufficient and not rely on taxpayer-funded govern-

ment benefits.

The change could have implications for nationals seeking green cards through immigration categories that remain subject to the public-charge ground of inadmissibility.

The guidance follows the Department of Homeland Security's decision to rescind the 2022 public-charge regulations. USCIS has now laid out how officers will apply the new framework when reviewing eligible adjustment-of-status applications.

Continued on page 28

Bridal Dreams Come to Life as Blink South Asian Bridal Expo Wows Sugar Land



SUGAR LAND, Texas: Blink Entertainment successfully hosted the Blink South Asian Bridal Expo on Sunday, August 23, 2026, at the Marriott Sugar Land, bringing together brides-to-be, families, wed-

ding professionals and members of the South Asian community for a day dedicated to weddings, fashion and celebrations.

The expo featured more than 40 vendors under one roof, offering vis-

itors an extensive range of wedding-related products and services. From bridal fashion and jewelry to beauty, décor, photography, event planning and other wedding essentials,

Continued on page 28

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KARACHI'S UNSOLVED HOUSING CRISIS

More than 60 percent of Karachi's population now lives in informal neighbourhoods because of the scarcity of affordable planned housing. Karachi's housing crisis began with the city's explosive growth after Partition and has persisted through seven decades of ambitious plans, failed resettlement schemes and shifting housing policies. The history of the city's failed interventions reveals a recurring lesson: housing cannot be separated from employment, transport, education and social networks. Can the city's policymakers learn from the mistakes of the past? And what can be done to house people in Pakistan's largest metropolis?



Arif Hasan
Hamna Syed

When Pakistan came into existence in August 1947, Karachi was a city of roughly 435,000 people. Within months, its population changed dramatically. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees arrived from India after Partition, seeking shelter, employment and security in the new country's capital.

The city's infrastructure, housing stock and public services had never been designed to absorb such numbers in such a short time. The shortage of housing that Karachi experiences today has its roots in those first years after Independence.

The newly established government faced an emergency unlike any it had encountered before. Refugees were accommodated in schools, military barracks, public buildings and temporary camps. Many forcibly occupied abandoned properties left behind by Hindus and Sikhs who had migrated to India. Others erected makeshift shelters on vacant land. These arrangements were intended to be temporary, but many became permanent as the demand for affordable housing continued to grow.

Karachi's population more than doubled within a few years. By the 1951 Census, the city's population had reached over one million people. Migration continued throughout the following decade, as people arrived not only from India but also from Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KP) and Balochistan in search of work. The city was becoming Pakistan's major commercial and administrative hub, but its housing policy failed to keep pace with its population growth.

INITIAL ATTEMPTS AT HOUSING

The government's first response focused on building formal housing. Pakistan Quarters, Martin Quarters, Federal B Area, Paposh Nagar and several other residential schemes were developed during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

These projects demonstrated that the state recognised the housing shortage, but they were never designed to meet the needs of the majority. Most units were built for government officers and public servants rather than low-income households or newly arrived migrants. The people facing the greatest housing insecurity remained largely outside the formal system.

Recognising that Karachi needed long-term planning, the government commissioned the Greater Karachi Plan, prepared by the Swedish consulting firm Merz Rendel Vatten (MRV) and published in 1951. It was the city's first comprehensive master plan. The plan proposed a structured expansion of Karachi through satellite towns, industrial areas, improved transport links and planned residential neighbourhoods. It attempted to guide future growth rather than simply respond to immediate crises.

The plan reflected many of the planning ideas popular at the time. It assumed that urban growth could be managed through comprehensive planning, zoning regulations and large-scale public investment. Satellite settlements were expected to reduce pressure on the city centre, while new infrastructure would accommodate future population growth.

The proposals were technically ambitious, but they also depended on financial resources and administrative capacity that

Pakistan simply did not possess during its early years. As a result, much of the master plan remained on paper. Karachi continued to grow, but it grew largely outside the framework envisioned by the planners.

THE RISE OF KATCHI ABADIS

This gap between planning and reality has become a defining feature of Karachi's development. Population growth was immediate. Planning operated slowly. Families in need of shelter could not wait for housing schemes that required years of surveys, land acquisition, financing and construction. They solved the problem themselves.

Throughout the 1950s, informal settlements began to appear across the city. These settlements, later known as katchi abadis, were not simply the result of illegal occupation, as they are often described. They reflected the absence of affordable alternatives. For many low-income households, the choice was never between formal housing and informal housing. It was between informal housing and no housing at all.

Many policymakers viewed these settlements as planning failures or illegal encroachments. Residents viewed them differently.

Over time, they provided access to employment, schools, transport and social networks that distant government housing often failed to offer. Location mattered as much as shelter. A family earning daily wages could not afford to live many kilometres away from its workplace simply because housing happened to be available there.

THE LANDHI-KORANGI INTERVENTION

During the late 1950s, the government attempted another major intervention through the Landhi-Korangi Township Scheme as part of the greater Karachi resettlement plan. This was initiated under the military government of Gen Ayub Khan and developed with support from the Ford Foundation and planned by Doxiadis, an internationally acclaimed planner.

The plan aimed to resettle tens of thousands of refugee families living in informal settlements close to the city centre. It was one of the largest resettlement programmes undertaken in Pakistan. The Landhi-Korangi Township Scheme proposed the construction of around 40,000 houses in two satellite towns for refugees and low-income families. However, only about 10,000 houses were completed before the project was discontinued.

The settlements were located on the outskirts of Karachi, with the expectation being that nearby planned industrial zones would develop to provide employment. This did not happen, forcing most residents to continue travelling to the city for work. The long commute increased transport costs, wasted valuable time and reduced employment opportunities, particularly for women.

It also placed additional pressure on Karachi's transport network, with Saddar — where most jobs were located at that time — becoming the main transport hub, leading to overcrowded bus terminals and the growth of informal markets that served daily commuters.

Residents were expected to pay for their one-room houses through monthly instalments, which would finance a revolving fund for future housing. However, residents were unable to keep

POPULATION OF KARACHI

1947: 435,000
1951: 1.138 million
2026: 21.2 million*

*Official 2026 estimates based on 2023 Census

up with the payments because of poor employment opportunities and the cost of commuting. Without a functioning revolving fund, the program became financially unsustainable and was eventually abandoned, achieving only a fraction of its original target.

There is another aspect to this project. The settlements created are uni-ethnic, and the residents are all working class. This creates homogenous settlements that have similar political views and affiliations, and enhances the development of stronger political conflicts, as evident in the violence in Karachi in the 1990s.

The commute that created the informal markets of Saddar also led to the displacements of those markets when the courts declared them to be illegal and passed orders that they should be demolished, adversely affecting Karachi's street economy and increasing poverty and alienation among its various protagonists.

The Landhi-Korangi scheme reflected a different planning philosophy. Instead of allowing informal settlements to expand, the state would relocate residents to planned townships equipped with roads, schools and basic services. On paper, the approach appeared rational. In practice, it exposed a problem that continues to shape urban policy today.

This experience challenged a common assumption in urban planning: that housing could be treated as an isolated problem. In reality, housing is closely linked with employment, transport, education and social networks. People choose where to live not only because of the quality of a house but also because of its relationship to the rest of their lives.

These early experiences have shaped the direction of Karachi's housing debate for decades. Governments continue to produce master plans and housing schemes. Yet the city expands primarily through the efforts of its own residents. Where formal housing remains unaffordable or inaccessible, people acquire land informally, build incrementally and create communities with limited or no state assistance.

RETHINKING HOUSING POLICY

By the 1960s, it had become evident that Karachi's housing problem could not be solved through conventional planning alone. Every new housing scheme addressed only a fraction of the demand, while thousands of new migrants continued to arrive each month.

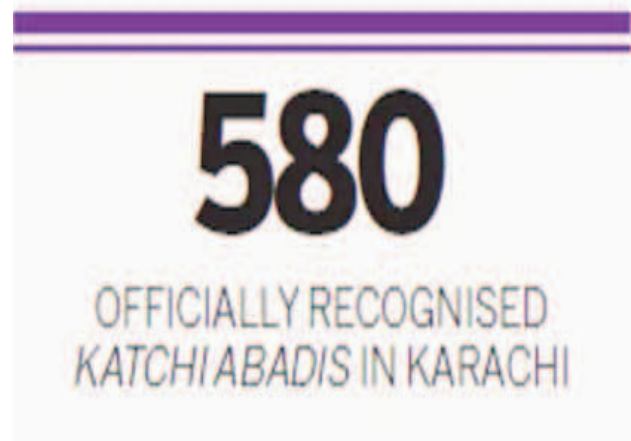
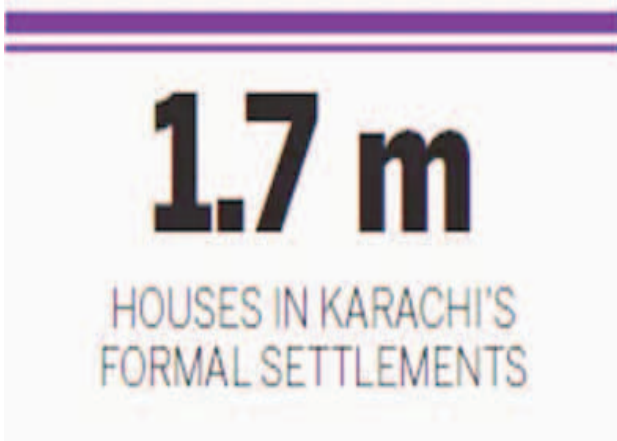
This forced planners to reconsider a basic assumption. For years, governments had been led to believe by international finance institutions (IFIs) and the United Nations (UN) that complete houses could be built and allocated to low-income families. The experience of Karachi suggested otherwise.

Constructing houses required large financial resources, lengthy administrative procedures and substantial public investment. The state simply lacked the capacity to provide homes, even unfinished ones, or with only basic infrastructure, for everyone who needed them.

Around the same time, a different way of thinking about housing was beginning to emerge internationally. Among its strongest advocates was the British architect and planner John F.C. Turner, whose work in Peru challenged conventional

Continued on Page 20

KARACHI'S UNSOLVED HOUSING CRISIS



Continued From Page 19
housing policy.

Turner argued that governments should not try to build houses for the poor. Instead, they should provide serviced land, secure tenure and basic infrastructure. Once people had access to land, they were generally capable of building and improving their own homes over time.

Turner's ideas represented a significant shift in formal urban planning. Housing was no longer viewed simply as a product supplied by the state. It was understood as a process in which families invested gradually, according to their income. Instead of waiting years for a completed house, households could begin with a single room, expand it when finances allowed and improve the structure over several years.

International agencies, including the World Bank and the UN, later incorporated many of these principles into what became known as 'Sites and Services' programmes. Sites, meaning land plots, and services, meaning water, sewerage and electricity, were developed and handed over to low-income residents.

In Karachi too, hundreds of units in sites and services schemes were developed, but they did not reach the poor, as they had to be paid for and were unaffordable to the target group, and the administrative process of acquiring them was long, cumbersome and very time-consuming. As such, many of the schemes lay empty for years and were subsequently purchased by middle-income groups. So the informal housing process continued.

The self-built informal housing process also supported the local economy. It created continuous employment for masons, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, transporters, suppliers of construction materials and countless daily-wage labourers. Unlike large government projects, where construction ended once the scheme was completed, self-built neighbourhoods generate economic activity for years. Housing not only provides shelter, it also creates livelihoods.

UPGRADING INSTEAD OF DEMOLISHING

Despite this evidence, official policy continues to regard informal settlements primarily as planning violations. Settlements are described as encroachments on public land rather than as evidence of an unmet demand for affordable housing and commercial development.

Demolition remains a common response. Yet, removing settlements does not remove the need for housing. Families displaced from one location usually settle in an informal settlement elsewhere. This does not reduce the population of informal settlements or of housing units in informal areas.

By the 1970s, informal settlements had become an established part of Karachi's urban landscape. The city could no longer be understood only through its planned neighbourhoods. Large sections of its workforce lived in older katchi abadis, which are comparatively nearer to work areas.

Government policy gradually began to change in the 1970s. Rather than clearing settlements, planners increasingly considered improving them. This shift was reflected in the Katchi Abadi Improvement and Regularisation Programme, introduced in 1978. The programme accepted that many informal settlements had become permanent communities and that upgrading them was often more practical than demolishing buildings and building new homes. Basic services, such as water supply, sanitation, roads and electricity, could be introduced without forcing residents to relocate.

The policy marked an important departure from earlier approaches. It recognised that low-income communities had already invested substantial resources in building their own neighbourhoods. Upgrading existing settlements was often less expensive and socially less disruptive than clearing them and constructing entirely new housing schemes elsewhere. It also acknowledged that security of tenure encour-

aged residents to invest further in improving their homes.

THE ORANGI PILOT PROJECT

An upscaled screengrab from a British Film Institute (BFI) video showing the Korangi Township Scheme, filmed during Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Pakistan in 1961: the Landhi-Korangi Township Scheme proposed the construction of around 40,000 houses in two satellite towns for refugees and low-income families | BFI

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this approach came through the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), established in 1980 under the leadership of Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan. Orangi had developed as one of the largest informal settlements in Asia. Like many katchi abadis, it lacked proper sanitation and basic infrastructure. Conventional planning suggested that only the government possessed the resources to solve such problems and that too through loans from the IFIs.

The OPP challenged that assumption. Instead of waiting for a centrally funded sanitation system, residents organised themselves to finance and construct neighbourhood sewer lines. Technical guidance was provided by the project, while communities contributed labour and resources, including financial ones. Government agencies remained responsible for larger trunk infrastructure, but residents demonstrated that they could successfully manage the sewage-related components within their own neighbourhoods.

The results attracted international attention. The project showed that low-income communities were not passive beneficiaries of development. They possessed knowledge, organisational capacity and a strong willingness to improve their living conditions, when given appropriate technical support and organisational guidance. The success of Orangi influenced urban planning well beyond Pakistan and became a reference point for community-led development across the developing world.

These experiences transformed the housing debate. The central question was no longer whether poor communities could build their own homes. Karachi had already answered that question. The more important question became why official policy continued to treat these communities as temporary or illegal despite decades of evidence that they formed an essential part of the city's growth.

HOUSING A CITY

Today, it is estimated that around 62 percent of Karachi's population lives in informal settlements, spread across more than 580 officially recognised katchi abadis and many more unlisted ones. Census reports suggest that there are over 1.7 million houses in formal settlements and a larger number in informal areas. As such, the developers of the informal settlements have performed better than the Karachi Development Authority (KDA) and other government agencies.

As we have seen above, over the past seven decades, Karachi has not simply expanded through government planning. It has been built, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, by the people who could not afford the cost of formal housing or wait for the state to fulfil its promises.

They acquired land through middlemen, borrowed money through community savings, sale of their women's jahaiz [dowry] jewellery, borrowings and gradually constructed homes. The important role of women in this process has yet to be documented. The city's history suggests that the real issue has never been whether people can build. It has always been whether planning policies recognise that they already do.

But now, other problems have surfaced, and new debates have been initiated. Under the influence of neoliberal thinking, the state no longer provides housing for the poor. They have to access housing through the market and at an impossible cost. Also, land near the old city katchi abadis is no longer available and the little that is, is unaffordable for low-income households. The only affordable land that is available is on the fringes of the city, and that makes the cost and time of travel even more expensive.

The informal sector developers have found a solution to

this problem as well.

Abadis nearer to the city are now being converted into high-rises. An 80 square yard or 120 square yard plot that has a single or double-story house on it is purchased by an informal developer and converted into a four-five or six-seven story building. This is a joint venture between the occupier/owner of the land and the investor.

The investor pays the cost of the land, along with two apartments on the last floor above. Thus, both the investor and the owner are satisfied. The owner of the building rents out the apartments or houses his extended family in them or sells the apartments at market rates, often receiving payments in instalments or through a well-established system of pagri [goodwill money].

The problem of travelling a long distance to and from work is thus partially overcome. This is the model that is enforced in most of Karachi today. Apartments developed in this fashion are available in old katchi abadis and can cost anything from two million on the ground floor to six hundred thousand on the top floor. But this is also too expensive for the poorer sections of society. As a result, an increasing number of Karachi families sleep on the pavements, under bridges, in parks where possible and in open spaces wherever available.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan has already declared apartments created by converting katchi abadi homes into multi-storey apartments illegal and also ordered their demolition. One building was demolished on the basis of that order. But that is all, for the scale of such demolitions would be so large that no government can carry it out without having to deal with the adverse political ramifications of such a decision.

IN SEARCH OF HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Currently, a master plan for Karachi is being prepared, and the question is how the plan will provide a policy that helps low-income seekers acquire a house.

It cannot support the regularisation of informally built high-rise housing because it would not last an earthquake of even medium-level intensity. Regularising them would be equivalent to supporting murder. And yet, it cannot demolish and reconstruct these apartments or retrofit them for financial and technical reasons. Building large colonies outside of the city will also result in failures similar to that of the Greater Karachi Development Plan and no land is available in bulk within the city of Karachi for such schemes.

However, there are smaller pieces of land scattered all over the city. I suggest that these lands be used for providing high-density housing for lower-income groups and providing long-term loans for self-help construction of these houses. I suggest that Pakistan Quarters be used as a pilot for this purpose instead of being handed over to a developer to build houses on a commercial basis, as proposed by some state ministers.

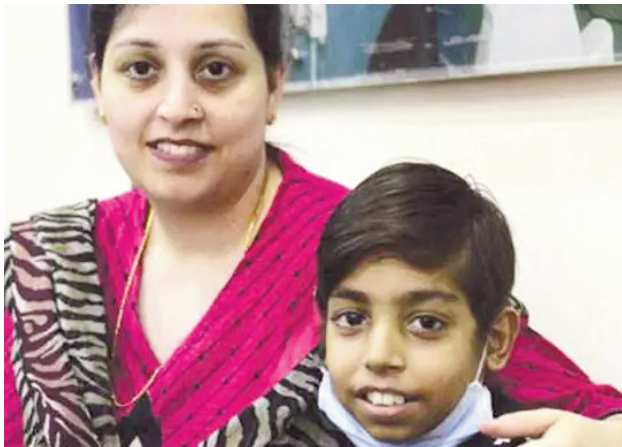
To begin with, these pieces of land should be identified and prevented from qabza [land grabbing]. Based on observations and intuition, it is my conviction that this could be the beginning of a solution, and that properly monitored instalments from the prospective owners could lead to a revolving fund for future developments. However, such a policy would require considerable political commitment.

It is also suggested that the alternatives to housing for low-income groups are explained and exhibited at the Expo Centre Karachi for public display and that the public is asked for their opinion on what is displayed. This would help in promoting and supporting political commitments for an innovative approach to housing policies.

Arif Hasan is an architect and urban planner. He can be reached at arifhasan37@gmail.com and through the website www.arifhasan.org

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HEALTH: DISEASES WITH NO NAME



Unaiza Haider and her son Ammar in 2014 before leaving for India for a kidney and liver transplant | Courtesy Unaiza Haider

Saddia Mazhar

Two-and-a-half-year-old Abiha was a cheerful child who loved running around the courtyard of her family's home in Hasilpur in southern Punjab. In the photographs her father, Muhammad Zafar, still keeps on his phone, she is smiling shyly at the camera in one, chasing her siblings in another. Nothing in those pictures suggests that she was suffering from a disease doctors could not identify.

It started with a recurring fever in March 2025. Then came vomiting, loss of appetite and a pronounced enlargement of her liver and spleen. As her condition deteriorated, her parents travelled from one hospital to another in search of answers.

Blood tests failed to provide a diagnosis. Bone marrow examinations ruled out one possibility after another. Specialists remained puzzled.

It was only after Abiha reached Lahore's Jinnah Hospital that doctors suspected a rare genetic disorder. They became concerned after learning that Zafar had previously lost two daughters — Fatima and Tahira — to a similar, unexplained illness. A specialised genetic test was needed to determine the cause, but the sample had to be sent abroad.

On June 27, 2026, Abiha died — before the report arrived.

Looking back, Zafar believes the same disease may have claimed the lives of two of his uncles decades ago, as well as another child in the extended family more recently.

THE MISSING DIAGNOSIS

Dr Sajid Ali, one of Abiha's treating physicians, tells Eos that doctors suspected a genetic disorder during her very first visit. Her enlarged lymph nodes, liver and spleen, along with the deaths of two siblings after similar unexplained illnesses, raised concerns about an inherited condition.

Despite extensive blood investigations and a bone marrow examination, no diagnosis could be confirmed. "Because of her clinical findings and the strong family history, we recommended advanced genetic testing," Dr Ali says.

But the family could not initially afford the test, worth Rs60,000, delaying genetic testing. Zafar, who runs a shop selling unstitched clothes, had already spent his savings on the treatment of his other two daughters.

Dr Muhammad Jawad Hassan, a medical geneticist associated with Islamabad's Shifa Hospital, tells Eos that the demand for genetic services has grown steadily in recent years. He says he personally evaluates 60 to 70 patients every month for genetic counselling, family risk assessment or specialised diagnostic investigations.

The number of patients requiring such services, Dr Hassan says, is likely to be much higher in public hospitals, where organised genetic services are largely unavailable. While basic chromosome analysis is available in some laboratories, advanced molecular tests — such as whole exome sequencing (WES) and whole genome sequencing (WGS) — are still not routinely available, even though they are important for diagnosing many rare inherited disorders.

As a result, many Pakistani families have to send samples abroad, increasing both the financial burden and the waiting time. "Families also need counselling to understand inheritance patterns, recurrence risks and the options available to them," Dr Hassan continues. "At the moment, genetic counselling and related services are available only in a few centres."

Prof Dr Shahid Baig, the dean of life sciences at the Health Services Academy in Islamabad, says Pakistan has made progress in establishing diagnostic facilities over the last two decades. But he adds that capacity remains inadequate for a country of over 240 million. Beyond infrastructure, he identifies shortages of clinical geneticists, molecular geneticists, genetic counsellors, bioinformaticians and laboratory scientists as some of the barriers to expanding genomic medicine nationwide.

According to Prof Baig, Pakistan's healthcare system still does not routinely identify inherited disorders early in life, when intervention can be most effective. He says introducing



Muhammad Zafar looks at a photo of his daughter Abiha on his cell phone. Abiha died on June 27, 2026, while Zafar still awaits the result of a specialised genetic test needed to determine what caused her death | Courtesy Muhammad Zafar

newborn screening programmes gradually should be a major public health priority, initially focusing on a limited number of treatable disorders before expanding as laboratory capacity improves. Early diagnosis, he says, not only improves clinical outcomes but also reduces the long-term emotional and financial burden on affected families.

Dr Zafar Mirza, a former state minister for health, says Pakistan's high rate of consanguineous marriages (ie those between blood relatives) makes genetic disorders an important but often overlooked public health challenge. In communities where marriages between relatives are common, recessive genetic disorders are more likely to occur.

Dr Mirza advocates greater investment in public awareness, premarital carrier screening, newborn screening programmes and genetic counselling, so that families understand their risks before having children and affected infants can be identified as early as possible.

THE GAP IN THE DATA

At the same time, Pakistan lacks a clear picture of how many people are living with genetic diseases. Federal health minister Mustafa Kamal says his ministry does not maintain a nationwide registry of patients with genetic disorders. This makes it difficult to estimate the scale of the problem or plan effective screening and treatment programmes.

Kamal says the information currently available comes from isolated institutional efforts rather than a coordinated national system. These include the Aga Khan University Biochemical Genetics Laboratory's registry for inherited metabolic disorders, the Punjab Thalassaemia and Other Genetic Disorders Prevention and Research Institute and several hospital-based registries for conditions such as lysosomal storage disorders.

To address the gap, Kamal says the ministry is drafting Pakistan's first national strategy on rare diseases. The proposed framework includes establishing a National Rare Disease Registry at the National Institute of Health (NIH) in Islamabad, integrating data from existing registries, mapping rare disease cases across the country, and developing standardised reporting systems for genetically confirmed patients.

As an interim measure, the ministry also plans a rapid assessment of major children's hospitals, to produce the country's first national estimate of rare disease cases.

The draft policy also proposes pilot newborn screening programmes for treatable inherited disorders, including congenital hypothyroidism and selected inherited metabolic diseases, alongside expanded carrier screening using Pakistan's existing thalassaemia infrastructure. Thalassaemia screening offers Pakistan an existing model for preventing an inherited disorder.

Sharmila Faruqi, a legislator of the Pakistan Peoples Party, introduced the Islamabad Capital Territory Compulsory Thalassaemia Screening Bill, passed by the National Assembly in March 2026. When signed into law, it will make premarital thalassaemia screening mandatory for prospective spouses in the federal capital. Sindh passed a similar law for screening spouses in 2014. In April 2025, Punjab passed a law making genetic testing, including for thalassaemia and other diseases, mandatory for admission to schools and madrasahs.

"The objective of the legislation is to ensure prospective couples know their carrier status before starting a family," says Faruqi. The proposed law will not stop two carriers from marrying. "It ensures they receive genetic counselling, so they understand the risks to future children and can make informed decisions," she says.

A PREVENTABLE BURDEN

According to the Punjab Thalassaemia and Other Genetic Disorders Prevention and Research Institute (PTGD), thalassaemia is Pakistan's most common inherited disorder. The institute estimates that around six per cent of Pakistan's population — approximately 14.2 million people — are healthy carriers of

a beta-thalassaemia mutation.

If both prospective parents carry the trait, each pregnancy carries a 25 per cent chance of resulting in a child with beta-thalassaemia major. The PTGD estimates that around 6,000 children are born with thalassaemia major every year, despite the disease being largely preventable through carrier screening and genetic counselling.

To combat the problem, the PTGD operates nine regional screening and genetic counselling centres across Punjab, linked to the 36 districts in the province.

Faruqi agrees that awareness, informed consent and effective screening policies are essential to reducing the number of children born with thalassaemia major.

One charity working with affected families is also focusing on prevention. Kashif Pervaiz of Sundas Foundation says that his organisation provides blood transfusions, laboratory services, counselling and medical care to around 10,000 registered thalassaemia patients across Pakistan. Alongside treatment, they actively promote carrier screening and public awareness through schools, universities and community outreach programmes.

AN ANSWER, AT LAST

Unlike Abiha and her family, Unaiza Haider from Lahore eventually received the answer she had spent years searching for.

Her son Ammar was three when she first noticed that his growth was slower than other children his age. Friends and relatives dismissed her concerns, insisting that every child develops differently. But as the years passed, she remained convinced that something was wrong.

Unaiza's fears were confirmed when eight-year-old Ammar developed persistent vomiting and severe pain. Doctors initially treated him for stomach problems, but Unaiza repeatedly insisted the pain seemed to be coming from his kidneys.

An ultrasound at a district hospital found nothing unusual, but a second scan at Lahore's Children's Hospital revealed multiple stones in both kidneys. Further investigations eventually led to a diagnosis of primary hyperoxaluria type 1 in 2011, an inherited disorder in which a deficiency of a liver enzyme causes oxalate to accumulate and damage the kidneys.

At the time, Pakistan had limited experience treating the condition. After consulting specialists in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, the family travelled to India in 2014, where Ammar underwent weeks of dialysis before receiving a combined liver and kidney transplant from two relatives. Today, more than a decade later, he is a healthy university student.

Looking back, Unaiza believes an earlier diagnosis could have spared her son years of uncertainty and suffering. "We were fortunate that we eventually found the answer," she says. "Many families are still searching for one."

BEYOND INHERITED DISORDERS

Not every child with a birth defect, however, has a rare inherited disorder.

Islamabad-based journalist Faiz Paracha's son, Asad, was diagnosed with congenital rubella syndrome after testing during pregnancy showed that his mother had contracted rubella. "Doctors had noticed an abnormality during the pregnancy but couldn't tell us what it was," he tells Eos. The condition left Asad visually impaired in one eye and with weakness on one side of his body.

More than a decade later, physiotherapy remains part of Asad's life, while corrective tendon surgery is still beyond the family's financial reach.

"The facilities exist," he says, "but for many families they remain inaccessible because of cost."

STILL WAITING

Following the recommendation of Abiha's doctor, the family paid Rs60,000 to have her blood sample sent abroad for advanced genetic testing through the Centre of Excellence in Molecular Biology (CEMB) at the University of the Punjab.

The family was told that the analysis could not be performed in Pakistan and the sample had to be sent abroad. Zafar says the CEMB took the sample on April 20, 2026, more than two months before she died. He is still waiting for the report.

Eos contacted the CEMB seeking information about Abiha's case as well as their diagnostic capacity and other available screening and testing facilities. No response was received by the time this story went to print.

The report Zafar is still waiting for can no longer save his daughter. But he hopes it will finally answer the question that has haunted his family for generations.

Zafar says he still contacts the laboratory, hoping the results will finally arrive. He has chosen not to tell them that his daughter is dead. "I don't need the report for treatment anymore," he says. "I only want to know the name of the disease."

The writer is an investigative journalist.

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Under the new management of Hisham Qaddura, WorldFood Warehouse in Houston celebrated its successful grand opening with a massive giveaway. The event featured a live raffle draw hosted by Consul General Muhammad Aftab Chaudhry and Siraj Narsi, handing out fantastic prizes to the local community.



South Asian Bridal Expo Showcases Wedding Trends, Fashion and Vendors in Sugar Land

Blink Entertainment's South Asian Bridal Expo brought the excitement and elegance of South Asian weddings to Marriott Sugar Land, featuring more than 40 vendors under one roof. Brides-to-be, families and wedding enthusiasts explored bridal fashion, jewelry, beauty, décor, photography, event services and other wedding essentials, while a captivating fashion show by Poshak added glamour to the day. The expo provided a valuable platform for attendees to discover the latest wedding trends, meet industry professionals and find everything needed to plan their dream celebrations.



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A mirror to ancient Gandhara

How a small Gandharan artefact illuminates beauty, identity and everyday life

By Arshad Awan

Among the surviving artistic treasures of ancient Gandhara, even the smallest objects reveal profound insights into the lives, beliefs, and cultural values of the people who inhabited this remarkable crossroads of civilisations. The Mirror Handle-Standing Woman, dating to approximately the first century BCE and carved from phyllitic schist, is one such object. Measuring only 12.1 centimetres in height, and now on display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US, this delicately sculpted artefact demonstrates that artistic excellence in Gandhara was not confined to monumental Buddha sculptures or grand architectural complexes. Instead, artistic refinement extended into everyday life, where practical objects became expressions of beauty, identity, social status, and cultural sophistication.

The artefact was initially used as the handle of a mirror for looking at oneself, for personal grooming, and possibly for ritual purposes. The standing female figure sculpted on it makes it a work of art, and it is the harmonious coupling of form and function evident in ancient Gandharan society. Most importantly, the artefact provides a glimpse into the social and cultural world of women, personal adornment, artistic ideals and intercultural exchange in one of the most cosmopolitan historical periods in South Asia.

The Mirror Handle-Standing Woman is a wonderful example of the incredible artistic expression of ancient Gandharan culture. Investing technical expertise and significance in this commonplace item, the sculptor made the woman look like a beautifully dressed young woman with a poised, elegant stance, whose finely detailed anatomy and carved drapery demonstrate the aesthetic sophistication and ideals of femininity of the ancient Gandhara culture. The intricate hairstyle, the jewellery and the flowing clothes reflect the artist's keen observation of the era's everyday fashion trends and his sense of grace, dignity and social status. The naturalistic portrayal of the body, the balance of the composition, and the folds of the drapery demonstrate how indigenous South Asian culture merged with Hellenistic art conventions prevalent in Gandharan art.

Gandhara was in a unique geographical location in the northern part of Pakistan and the eastern part of Afghanistan in the first century BCE. The area lay along trade routes linking Central Asia, Persia, India, and the Mediterranean world, and it evolved into one of the most culturally diverse societies in antiquity. Its cities were continuously traversed by merchants, monks, artists, diplomats, and travellers, who shared their ideas, art, technology, and religion.

The Gandharan society was influenced by successive political powers such as the Achaemenids, Greeks, Indo-Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and ultimately the Kushans. These influ-



ences were not a replacement for local traditions; instead, they blended with local customs to give rise to a unique artistic language distinct from any other art tradition in the ancient world.

Mirrors were made from polished bronze, copper, or other shiny materials, and required highly skilled artisans to produce; they were often the possessions of the upper classes.

This mirror handle thus had a special place between use and art. It was constantly held, touched and displayed, and so its decoration took on special significance. Being a focus for sculptors, they became miniature masterpieces that mimicked the owner's taste, wealth and cultural values. This standing female figure, carved into the handle, would have followed its owner as they groomed themselves day to day. These each further emphasised the connection between beauty, the enjoyment of art, and an individual's identity.

What is most amazing about the sculpture is the level of craftsmanship achieved in such a small piece. This small figure, less than five inches tall, shows the beautiful proportions, precise modelling and elegant stance typical of Gandharan art. The selection of phyllitic schist is another indication of the sophistication of the Gandharan artisans. The stone was used to create detailed carvings and achieve a smooth finish that added to its beauty and softness. Phyllitic schist was used throughout Gandhara as a medium for monumental religious sculpture and for smaller luxury items owing to its durability and fine texture.

All the contours of the handle serve to enhance the beauty and usefulness of everyday life, and reflect the Gandharan concept that beauty should enhance it. The figure, though small, is striking for its attitude and precise proportions. Throughout Asian and Mediterranean art, standing figures have been used to represent dignity, composure and self-confidence.

The sculptor was not so deeply interested in depicting movement or dramatic action but rather calm elegance. This is characteristic of

Gandharan art, which emphasised restraint to suggest quietness, refinement of character, and social poise. Her attitude also may have been symbolic. Standing figures of women in ancient artworks often symbolised fertility, prosperity, abundance, beauty, or divine protection. The sculpture embodies a sense of grace and beauty in a woman, whether as a representation of a woman as a person, an idealised beauty or a symbol.

The emphasis on natural anatomy, harmonious proportions, and lyrical pose indicates awareness of artistic traditions brought to the region by Hellenistic influence, as well as strong regional aesthetic interests.

While archaeology can only provide bits and pieces of daily life, items like this mirror handle can give us insight into the status of women in Gandharan society.

Micro-finds such as personal grooming items (e.g., combs), jewellery, cosmetics, textiles and mirrors are common finds in ancient South Asia. Clothing, jewellery, and other items indicate that visibility was a significant component of the social identities of women of wealthy families. It is, however, not just vanity that is beauty in ancient Gandhara. Clothing frequently was a symbol of family honour, marital status, ritual purity, prosperity, and community life. Elaborate dress and ornamentation were necessary for festivals, religious ceremonies, marriages and seasonal celebrations.

An artistically carved mirror is a sign of ownership of luxury items and the ability to appreciate fine craftsmanship. It also reflects the wealth Gandhara enjoyed as a result of its strategic location on international trade routes. Thus, women become not only objects of sculpture but also subjects within the cultural and economic life of their communities, making their surroundings more elegant and refined.

The mirror handle thus stands for more than physical beauty; it is a symbol of cultural ideals of refinement, civility and social identity. Grooming

evolved into a way of life and a cultural tradition, becoming both a necessity and a means for people to affirm their identity, style and status. The female figure on the handle might have represented an ideal and embodied elegance valued within Gandharan society.

Luxury in Gandhara was not so much a luxury as a different kind of extravagance. Art became the measure and sign of civilisation. The patrons helped nurture the skills of sculptors whose work enhanced religious monuments and enclosures as well as private property; the sculptors were highly valued and a culture of craftsmanship developed. The unique intercultural setting of Gandhara is also seen in The Mirror Handle-Standing Woman.

After Alexander the Great conquered the world and Hellenistic kingdoms were set up in Central Asia, Greek art spread eastward. These traditions were marked by natural anatomy, realistic drapery, balanced proportions and harmonious composition. The artists of Gandhara did not slavishly copy the Greek models but used them to suit the local subjects and taste. Indian notions of femininity, dress and ornamentation merged with the Mediterranean sculptural techniques.

The synthesis created a completely new art vocabulary. The figure of a standing woman is a good representation of how artists in Gandhara adopted international influences and adapted them into expressions more appropriate to their own society. It is one of Gandhara's greatest historical accomplishments to embody cultural diversity without sacrificing its own identity. In many ancient civilisations, the mirror was given symbolic significance, and much more than a reflection of reality. Mirrors held a special place in Asian mythology; they were said to symbolise truth, self-knowledge and purity in South Asian traditions. They might also be seen in marriages, fertility rituals or devotional activities. In the Buddhist context, reflection sometimes came to represent the understanding of impermanence.

The meaning of this mirror is not yet clear, but its decorative artwork suggests that its owner valued it more for its artistic qualities than for its practical use. The standing female figure might have been a reminder to users not only of outward beauty but also of ideals of grace, beauty, and social refinement.

All looking in the mirror happened as a view of art, identity and cultural values at the same time. Monuments and royal inscriptions convey much of the history, but not much can be captured in the small artefacts. Grand stupas celebrate religious beliefs; palaces symbolise political power; but personal objects offer a glimpse into the everyday lives of ordinary people. Today, a contemporary viewer can catch a glimpse of the moments of daily life in ancient Pakistan through the mirror handle, a woman preparing for celebration, arranging jewellery,

applying cosmetics, or partaking in family rituals.

The sensitive scenes suggest that many of the people who lived in the Gandharan world had much in common with us now: they sought to look good, were concerned with who they were, had families and sought social acceptance, and appreciated beauty. This continuity over two millennia gives us a stronger link with those who lived in this landscape.

Buddhist images are the primary elements associated with Gandharan art. Buddhist sculpture is obviously the highlight of Gandharan art, but secular objects show that Gandharan sculptors of Gandhara were very versatile artists.

In addition to monasteries, artistic traditions are evident in other objects such as mirror handles, cosmetic containers, jewellery, decorative plaques, and household ornaments, which are also found in the marketplaces. Thus, the Mirror Handle: Standing Woman enriches our knowledge and appreciation of Gandharan sculpture. It is a reminder that artists were employed not only by religious institutions but also by private patrons seeking beauty in their domestic or personal lives.

This diversity enhances our understanding of Gandhara as a complex urban culture rather than merely a place of pilgrimage for the followers of the Buddha. The Mirror Handle-Standing Woman is now a part of Pakistan's cultural heritage and a testament to the extraordinary artistic contributions of the ancient Gandharan civilisation, symbolising the main attributes of Pakistan's historical identity, including cultural diversity, artistic innovation, intercultural dialogue and outstanding craftsmanship.

Its survival over more than two thousand years accentuates the value of conserving the archaeological heritage. Each artefact adds yet another piece to the puzzle of the people who have created the cultural landscape of South Asia. The museums contribute significantly to the conservation of these objects and help people today understand the genius of ancient civilisations and take pride in Pakistan's history.

While doing so, the artefact has the capacity to reveal the uniqueness of Gandhara as a cross-over point of civilisations, where Indian traditions, albeit not imported whole, were encountered and creatively integrated with Greek, Persian, Central Asian, and eventually Kushan traditions, to create one of the most unique art traditions in the ancient world. The result of a small sculpture at the end is that history is remembered not just by kings, battles and monuments, but also by the treasures of everyday folk. This relic still bears the image of its owner's face, as well as the culture and artistic tradition of Gandhara, which continues and will continue to endure.

Arshad Awan is a Lahore-based author, educationist, local historian, and brand strategist, and can be reached at arshadawan@msn.com

USCIS public charge rule takes effect September 18

Continued from page 17

USCIS said that no single factor can independently establish that an applicant is likely to become a public charge, except when an applicant fails to provide a sufficient required Affidavit of Support.

What changes under the new guidance?

Beginning September 18, USCIS officers may consider whether an applicant has received or is seeking certain means-tested public benefits.

These can include cash assistance for income maintenance, housing assistance, food stamps, financial aid for college and other similar benefits. Applications for, approval of, or certification to receive such benefits may also be taken into account.

USCIS said applicants seeking adjustment of status to lawful permanent resident generally remain subject to the public-charge ground of inadmissibility unless they are applying under an immigration category that is exempt.

Family-based immigrants subject to public charge

The categories include:

- Spouses, children and parents of US citizens
- Unmarried sons and daughters of US citizens and their children
- Spouses, children and unmarried sons and daughters of lawful permanent residents
- Married sons and daughters of US citizens, along with their spouses and children
- Brothers and sisters of US citizens
- Fiancé(e)s of US citizens
- Widows and widowers of US citizens
- Employment-based immigrants subject to public charge

The rule also covers several employment-based categories, including:

- Priority workers
- Professionals with advanced degrees or individuals with exceptional ability
- Skilled workers, professionals and other workers
- Certain current and former employees of the US government abroad
- Panama Canal Zone employees
- Foreign medical school graduates
- Retired employees of international organizations
- International broadcasters
- Diversity visa immigrants

Who is exempt?

Several groups remain exempt from the public-charge ground of inadmissibility. They include:

- Asylees and refugees
- Amerasian immigrants at admission
- Special immigrant juveniles
- Applicants for registry
- Applicants seeking Temporary Protected Status
- Victims of human trafficking applying for T nonimmigrant status
- Victims of qualifying criminal activity applying for U nonimmigrant status
- Born in Canada who are not US citizens

Five factors USCIS officers will consider

Under the new framework, immigration officers will examine five statutory factors when determining whether an applicant is likely to become a public charge:

- Age
- Health
- Family status
- Assets, resources and financial status
- Education and skills

The broader review means officers will assess an applicant's overall circumstances rather than relying on a single factor when making a public-charge determination. For nationals pursuing permanent residency through categories covered by the rule, the change could add another layer of scrutiny to the green card process.

JKAAH Announces \$25,000 Commitment for 100 Laptops for University of Karachi Students

Continued from page 17

distribution ceremony planned for October 2026.

The announcement came during a quarterly session of the JKAAH Board of Directors, where the association finalized its strategy for distributing laptops to students in need of digital resources to support their education.

Faheem Akhund, head of JKAAH, along with other board members, reaffirmed the association's commitment to supporting students and expanding access to technology and educational opportunities.

The initiative follows a historic Memorandum of Understanding signed between the University of Karachi and JKAAH during the tenure of former Vice Chancellor Professor Dr. Khalid Iraqi. The agreement focuses on educational opportunities, digital access and student empowerment.

Under the initiative, 100 laptops valued at \$25,000 are planned to be presented at a formal distribution ceremony at the University of Karachi in October 2026. JKAAH said coordination with university officials and the student selection process will proceed ahead of the ceremony.

The initiative represents another effort by the Houston-based alumni association to strengthen its connection with the University of Karachi while supporting deserving students through education and technology.

Trump administration proposes changes limiting H-1B holders' access to refundable tax credits

Continued from page 17

(PRWORA) by clarifying that the refunded portion of certain refundable individual income tax credits are federal public benefits. They would also establish rules regarding who is legally eligible to receive them, according to the release.

"Under PRWORA, only U.S. citizens, U.S. nationals, and qualified

aliens are eligible to receive federal public benefits. The proposal follows legal analysis by the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel concluding that the refunded portions of the affected credits are federal public benefits," the release said.

The proposed regulations would apply PRWORA to four individual income tax credits: the adoption tax credit, the child tax credit, the American opportunity tax credit and the earned income tax credit. To receive the refunded portion of an affected credit, taxpayers must be U.S. citizens, U.S. nationals or qualified aliens on the date they file the federal income tax return first claiming the affected credit.

Qualified aliens include lawful permanent residents, asylees, refugees and certain other groups defined or specified under PRWORA. Taxpayers would also have to declare on their tax returns, under penalty of perjury, that they are eligible to receive the refunded portion of the credit. For a joint return, only one spouse would need to be a U.S. citizen, U.S. national or qualified alien.

The release also said the proposed regulations would apply to tax years ending on or after the date the regulations are published as final regulations. The changes come as immigration and visa policies face increased scrutiny under the Trump administration.

Spirit of Love and Devotion Fills Makkah Masjid Dairy Ashford on Eid Milad-un-Nabi ﷺ

Continued from page 17

community.

He said that the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provides guidance for people in every aspect of life and that true love and devotion to the Prophet ﷺ should be reflected through good character, righteous conduct and adherence to his teachings.

The speaker also emphasized the importance of unity and brotherhood among Muslims, encouraging community members to remain connected with their faith while promoting peace, mutual respect and harmony in society.

Mufti Abdul Awaisi, Custodian of Makkah Masjid Dairy Ashford, also addressed the gathering and shared his thoughts on the significance of Eid Milad-un-Nabi ﷺ. In his speech, he emphasized the importance of remembering the teachings and exemplary character of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and encouraged community members, particularly families and younger generations, to remain connected to their faith and the Sunnah.

A large number of community members attended the special program at Makkah Masjid. The gathering provided an opportunity for attendees to reflect upon the exemplary life of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and renew their commitment to following his teachings.

The atmosphere at the mosque remained spiritual throughout the program, with attendees participating in prayers and religious observances in connection with the occasion.

The Eid Milad-un-Nabi ﷺ gathering also served as an important community event, bringing families and members of Houston's Muslim community together in a spirit of religious devotion and fellowship.

At the conclusion of the program, Abdul Awaisi led the special dua, praying for the well-being and unity of the Muslim Ummah, peace and stability around the world, and the prosperity and protection of the Houston Muslim community.

The gathering concluded with prayers and expressions of devotion and love for the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Bridal Dreams Come to Life as Blink South Asian Bridal Expo Wows Sugar Land

Continued from page 17

the event provided attendees with an opportunity to explore and connect with businesses serving the growing South Asian wedding market in the Houston area.

A major highlight of the expo was the fashion show by Poshak, which showcased South Asian bridal and formalwear styles and added a glamorous touch to the event. The presentation offered guests a look at contemporary bridal fashion while highlighting traditional designs and craftsmanship.

Held from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., the expo attracted visitors from Sugar Land, Houston and surrounding communities. The event created a convenient platform for couples and families preparing for upcoming weddings to meet vendors, discover new ideas and make arrangements for their special celebrations.

Organized by Blink Entertainment, the South Asian Bridal Expo reflected the diversity and richness of South Asian wedding traditions while providing a modern marketplace for the community's wedding needs.

The event at Marriott Sugar Land also served as a networking opportunity for vendors and industry professionals, allowing businesses to introduce their services directly to prospective clients and build connections within the South Asian community.

With its combination of bridal fashion, wedding services, vendors and live presentations, the expo offered attendees an engaging and comprehensive experience centered around one of life's most important celebrations.

PAGH General Secretary Expresses Concern Over University Incident in Islamabad

Continued from page 17

responsible citizenship.

"Educational institutions are meant to nurture knowledge, discipline, character, mutual respect, and responsible citizenship. Any conduct that undermines these values has no place in an academic environment," Zaidi stated.

While acknowledging that students reserve the right to express grievances or present differing opinions, the PAGH General Secretary highlighted that such expressions must remain peaceful, lawful, and aligned with institutional codes of conduct. Respect for individuals, the rule of law, and institutional discipline remain fundamental to sustaining a constructive learning environment.

Zaidi called for a fair and transparent investigation into the matter, advocating for appropriate disciplinary and legal action if university regulations or public laws were found to have been breached. He noted that accountability is essential to preserving the dignity of academic spaces and deterring similar disruptions in the future.

Concluding his statement, Zaidi emphasized the pivotal role of Pakistan's youth in shaping the country's future, urging students to embody integrity, tolerance, and respect under all circumstances while maintaining universities as centers for constructive dialogue rather than confrontation.

CAIR seeks probe of alleged voter-impersonation stunt in Minnesota

MINNEAPOLIS — The Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has called for a criminal investigation after activists allegedly used Muslim stereotypes and tried to impersonate a real voter at a polling place.

The activists, reportedly linked to the Florida-based Citizen Justice League — formerly known as Project Veritas — are accused of wearing clothing associated with Muslims, affecting exaggerated accents, and attempting to test the state's voter-vouching system during a primary.

One participant allegedly identified himself to officials as William Pomeranz, a real Minnesota voter; the activists did not cast ballots, and poll workers reported the incident. Impersonating a voter in Minnesota is a felony carrying up to seven years in prison and a \$20,000 fine.

CAIR Minnesota director Jaylani Hussein said the incident should not be dismissed as a stunt, arguing it combined an attempt to test election procedures with stereotypes portraying Muslims as deceptive or fraudulent.

The case raises two distinct concerns, the group said: whether election law was broken, and whether using a fabricated Muslim identity reinforced harmful stereotypes. Concerns about election security, it argued, should be pursued through lawful oversight, not unlawful impersonation.

CAIR has also expanded voter-engagement efforts ahead of the 2026 midterms, launching a national platform to give Muslim voters information and resources to participate and defend their voting rights.

FIVE YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE

Taliban secured their grip on Kabul, but economic hardship, repression, and militant ties will deepen its isolation



“The biggest vulnerability facing the Taliban right now is international isolation. The world is not recognising them as a legitimate government. And it is not just international isolation, but domestic and regional isolation too

Bahram Nooristani

By Naveed Hussain |

Five years ago, the Taliban triumphantly marched into Kabul as the Ashraf Ghani government crumbled with dizzying speed. The Afghan National Army and police virtually vanished into thin air. The capital city descended into chaos after US troops completed their hurried withdrawal and foreign diplomats fled. At the airport, thousands of terrified Afghans surged through the gates and onto the tarmac, desperate to escape the Taliban's return to power.

The haunting images of those final days have been etched into history. The last US serviceman boarding a military aircraft under the cover of darkness, captured on a night-vision camera, evoked another American retreat half a century earlier: the fall of Saigon. But nothing embodied the desperation of those final hours more vividly than a viral video clip of a US military transport plane roaring down the Kabul runway as frantic Afghans clung to its exterior and landing gear in a final, doomed bid for freedom.

After the longest and costliest war in American history, the United States handed Afghanistan back to the very Taliban it had ousted from power 20 years ago. The Taliban not only reclaimed power but also seized weapons worth billions of dollars left behind by the US military. The same weapons would later become available to transnational militant groups using Afghan territory as a launchpad to destabilise neighbouring countries.

A photograph of euphoric Taliban commanders ensconced in the presidential palace, flanked by gun-toting fighters, came to symbolise the group's stunning battlefield triumph. For the Taliban, it was a historic victory. For Afghans, however, it marked the beginning of yet another uncertain chapter in the fraught history of their country.

Five years after victory

Since seizing control, the Taliban have consolidated their hold over Afghanistan, but the victory parade has given way to a far more difficult reckoning. Questions over security, a battered economy, women's rights, a suffocated press and increasingly fraught ties with neighbouring countries haunt their rule. There was once hope that “Taliban 2.0” would be different: chastened by the failures of their first, hermetic stint in power. That hope, however, has proved illusory.

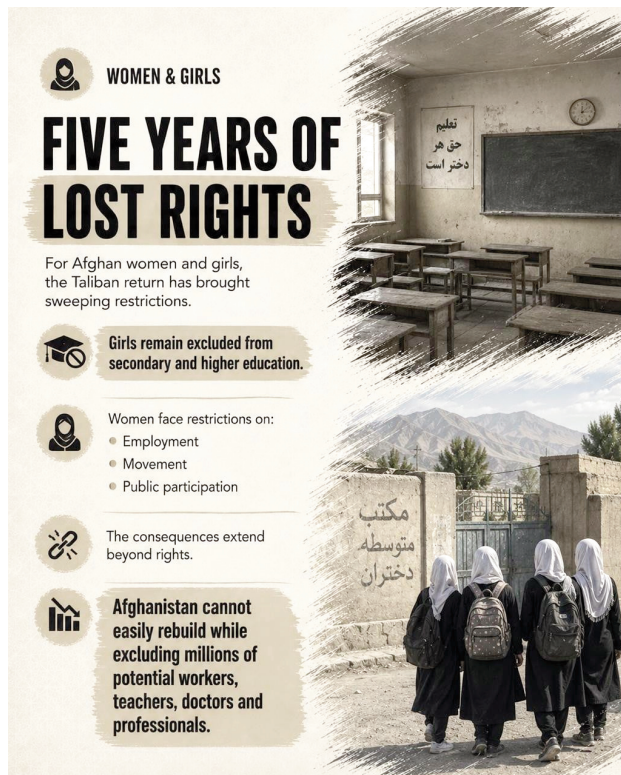
“The greatest threat to the Taliban regime comes from within: economic hardship and its restrictions on human rights, particularly women's education and employment,” says Afghan affairs expert Imtiaz Gul. However, he believes frustration with the Taliban's rigid governance has yet to reach a tipping point.

Maj Gen (retd) Inam Ul Haq agrees but warns that the Taliban's grip on power could unravel quickly if the regime doesn't change course. “On the surface, Taliban rule may appear solid under Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, but if Afghan history is any guide, undercurrents tend to surface unexpectedly and sweep everything along with them,” says Inam, who has written extensively on Afghanistan.

One major achievement the Taliban can claim is ending the nationwide war. They drove out US and NATO forces and humbled once-powerful warlords. With the likes of Ismail Khan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar either captured, weakened or gone, the Taliban faced no apparent formidable security challenge. And this sense of dominance has made them increasingly bold — and increasingly uncompromising.

The first cracks

That dominance, however, has also exposed the consequences of the Taliban's approach to governance. While the de facto rulers have restored a semblance of security, their medieval approach to governance, inept handling of the economy, intolerance of political opposition and dissent, strict interpretation of shariah, and revival of public corporal punishments fuelled resentment, particularly among non-Pashtun ethnic groups. The spectre of civil war has returned. And the first embers are glowing in the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan. Juma Khan Fateh, a non-Pashtun dissident Taliban commander, openly called for revolt against the regime. With people increasingly fed up with the regime, his call gained considerable traction. Fighting was reported in the districts of Darwaz, Nesi, Zebak and Yaftal-e Sufia. The Taliban mayor was recently killed, days after the provincial information and culture director was also gunned down.



Reports claim Fateh surrendered to the regime last week. However, analysts view the episode as a manifestation of growing tensions between local Badakhshani Taliban and non-local regime officials. “The majority of Taliban members are Pashtun, while other ethnic groups remain represented only in small numbers. Real decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a very few, reflecting a highly centralised system,” says US-based Afghan rights activist Bahram Nooristani. “This concentration of power in the hands of one ethnic group is fuelling growing resentment.”

Meanwhile, other non-jihadi groups — including National Resistance Front (NRF), Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), Homeland Guardians Front (HGF), Afghanistan United Front (AUF), Green Trend of Afghanistan (GTA), Freedom and Justice Movement (FGM), and Afghanistan Republican Front (ARF) — are also reviving hidden caches, local stockpiles, and older weaponry to challenge the Taliban's claim of complete control over the country.

“Badakhshan has become a microcosm of resistance to Taliban rule,” says Inam. “Resistance groups, including the NRF, the AUF and smaller factions, have repeatedly sought to challenge the Taliban there. They see Badakhshan as the most promising place to establish a ‘Taliban-free zone’ that could serve as a springboard for resistance elsewhere in Afghanistan,” he adds.

Currently, the resistance is fragmented and may not pose an existential threat to the Taliban regime. But analysts believe if isolated confrontations coalesce, Badakhshan could develop into a serious challenge. The unrest could then spread to other northern provinces, where the Taliban have historically faced resistance from non-Pashtun communities.

“As of now, this Badakhshan insurgency does not represent any existential threat to the Taliban regime,” says Gul. “A lot would depend on whether the majority of former Northern Alliance commanders and leading figures return to Afghanistan or come to Tajikistan and lead the fight from there. If they don't do this, then they don't really stand any genuine chance of success against the Taliban regime.”

An economy surviving, not thriving

When the Taliban captured Kabul, fears of an economic free-fall ran high. The economy contracted significantly, but the regime managed to keep it afloat, even as it continues to struggle under the weight of international isolation, the absence of formal recognition, frozen funds, withdrawal of foreign aid, and a persistent liquidity crunch. Poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and humanitarian hardship remain widespread. The Taliban's latest published budget, for 2023, stood at \$2.44 billion — less than half the roughly \$6 billion budget under the Ghani government in 2021. Inflation has compounded the pressure, rising to 7.6% by March 2026 from an average 3.6% in 2025, driven by higher food prices, supply disruptions and rising demand. Unemployment has nearly doubled since 2021, according to the UN, while more than half a million jobs have disappeared.

Under the Taliban, the Afghan economy continues to rely heavily on agriculture, trade and aid, with mining becoming increasingly important. The country's gold, copper, lithium and rare earths reserves have attracted growing regional interest. The regime has expanded mining contracts and promoted the sector as a major source of revenue. Questions, however, remain over transparency and who ultimately benefits from the mineral wealth.

“The concern is that the Taliban may be treating mining primarily as a way to generate revenue and sustain their own government, rather



“The greatest threat to the Taliban regime comes from within: economic hardship and its restrictions on human rights, particularly women's education and employment

Imtiaz Gul

than building a transparent, professional, and sustainable sector,” says Nooristani. “This approach might keep their government afloat, but it doesn't build Afghanistan's economy.”

Half the country shut out

For Afghan women, the Taliban's return to power has meant a dramatic loss of rights. Girls remain excluded from education, while women have been pushed out of many workplaces. “Since 2021, girls have been barred from formal education beyond primary education, resulting in the systematic exclusion of an estimated 2.4 million girls from secondary education by 2026. Women have also been barred from university education since 2022 and continue to face severe restrictions on employment and participation in public life,” according to a report released by UNESCO this month.

These regressive policies have created divisions within the top cadres and invited widespread international condemnation.

“It seems to be a gender apartheid regime. The Taliban have made it clear that women will not receive education beyond the sixth grade. They are barred from working, while their movement and personal choices are severely restricted,” says senior broadcast journalist Hassan Khan. “After five years in power, there are no women doctors, engineers, nurses or teachers,” he adds. “This is not merely a human rights issue; it concerns the very future of Afghanistan.”

Almost half of Afghanistan's population, around 22 million women and girls, are being denied the opportunity to participate in nation-building. Under Taliban rule, women have been steadily erased from public life — a policy with profound economic consequences for millions of families.

“This is particularly devastating in a war-ravaged country like Afghanistan, where many women are widows and the sole breadwinners for their families, yet they have also been shut out of the workforce. UN figures suggest that only around 7% of women now have access to employment,” says senior journalist Haq Nawaz Kattikhel.

Such sweeping restrictions on women exist nowhere else in the Muslim world. “Even Islamic Shariah does not permit the denial of women's rights. A leading Darul Uloom has issued a fatwa stating that barring women from education and employment, or denying them opportunities to work, is strictly against Islam and Shariah. Those imposing such restrictions are violating the very tenets of Islam,” adds Khan.

A country without a free voice

The Taliban have also changed Afghanistan's media landscape over the last five years. Today, journalists face increasingly tight rules governing what they can report, whom they can interview, and how they can discuss political issues.

So far, the regime has issued more than 20 national directives and numerous provincial decrees muzzling the press. According to Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), criticism of the regime is prohibited, women face sweeping restrictions, political debate has been silenced and broadcasting images of living beings is banned. In January 2026, a leaked new Code of Criminal Procedure offered no protection or exemption for media workers, leaving them vulnerable to legal threats, imprisonment and other severe penalties.

On the World Press Freedom Index, the country ranks 175th out of 180. “The women journalists and media workers still there may be the last generation Afghanistan has. With women barred from education and professional life for five years, there is no new generation of qualified female journalists,” says Khan.

Journalists, men and women alike, have been told not to violate ‘Islamic values’ or ‘national interests’ as defined by the Taliban, effectively criminalising criticism of their rule. “Afghanistan is now facing an almost total media blackout, with dozens of outlets shut down and women's space in the media shrinking dramatically,” says Kattikhel, The Washington Post's special correspondent on Afghanistan.

“In a conservative society like Afghanistan, women reporters were often the only ones able to access and tell women's stories. With them pushed out, those voices have largely disappeared from television, radio and print — a serious loss for Afghan women and the world's understanding of their plight.”

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FIVE YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE

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and regional realignment

Internationally, the Taliban remain isolated, but they are far from ignored. Regional powers continue to engage with Kabul, driven by security and strategic interests. China seeks stability and economic access; Iran is focused on border security; India sees an opportunity amid the growing Kabul-Islamabad rift; and Central Asian states prioritise trade and containing militancy. Yet none has formally recognised the Taliban regime. Russia remains the sole country to have done so.

“The biggest vulnerability facing the Taliban right now is international isolation. The world is not recognising them as a legitimate government. And it is not just international isolation, but domestic and regional isolation too,” says Nooristani.

Former ambassador Mansoor Ahmad Khan says the Taliban are to blame themselves for their global and regional isolation. “When they assumed power, the expectation was that they would work toward stability at home and stable engagement with the rest of the world, including the region and the wider international community. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen,” he adds.

“We advised them to strengthen their government through a participatory governance framework, engaging with other communities, political leaders and groups inside Afghanistan, and working out a roadmap for relations with the rest of the world. That did not happen either,” says Mansoor, who managed diplomatic ties in Kabul during the 2021 Taliban takeover, assisting with international evacuations.

From strategic depth to strategic distrust

While the Taliban have sought to diversify their external ties, their most fraught relationship may remain with their eastern neighbour, Pakistan. Many in Islamabad had expected ties with Kabul to improve after the Taliban’s return to power. Instead, relations have steadily deteriorated. “The Pakistan-Afghanistan relations right now aren’t just in a bad phase — they are arguably in the worst phase in the history of the relationship,” says Mansoor.

The main issue bedeviling the relationship is the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the banned umbrella group responsible for much of the terrorist violence in Pakistan. Islamabad accuses the TTP of operating from safe havens on Afghan soil and using them as launchpads for attacks inside Pakistan. The Taliban regime has been reluctant to take action against the group, instead maintaining plausible deniability despite repeated demands from Islamabad.

“Pakistan’s central concern has been that whatever government sat in Kabul would cooperate with Pakistan on combating cross-border terrorism, particularly given the intensifying attacks in recent years from the TTP, the BLA, and other groups sheltering on Afghan

soil. That cooperation never really materialised, and cross-border terrorism into Pakistan kept increasing,” says Mansoor.

The 38th report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team states that the Taliban continue to support the TTP as attacks against Pakistan increase in frequency and lethality. The escalation has resulted in deadly military skirmishes between the two countries, while border closures have disrupted trade and movement.

Inam finds the UN report genuinely disconcerting as it describes the threat picture coming out of Afghanistan as very complex. “Al Qaeda’s support to the TTP and the BLA has moved past advisory support into direct involvement,” he says. “The report also notes that TTP has raised two new divisions — one for Gilgit-Baltistan and one for Azad Jammu and Kashmir — and is developing its own drone capability, essentially an ‘air force.’ It’s consolidating and expanding its reach, with collusion between TTP, al Qaeda, the BLA, and elements of the Afghan government.”

The UN report also says that around 2,000 TTP fighters and their families have been moved away from the Pakistani border. Mullah Hibatullah has reportedly warned the TTP to stop attacks or risk losing Taliban support. But the UN assessment suggests that such measures are aimed at managing the group rather than dismantling its infrastructure.

“If the UN is verifying that the Afghan side has taken some steps to manage the TTP, that is a positive development, but simply managing it is not enough. They need to take more credible measures that actually prevent the TTP from carrying out cross-border attacks,” says Mansoor.

It is intriguing that the Taliban are willing to risk their relationship with Pakistan by harbouring the TTP. “The Taliban have found it genuinely difficult to take strong military action against groups like the TTP and BLA — partly because they share ideological ground with them, and partly out of fear that cracking down on them could push those fighters toward bigger international terrorist networks like al Qaeda or ISKP instead,” says Mansoor.

Inam, however, believes the Taliban regime might be using the TTP and other terror groups as bargaining chips in its dealing with neighbours. “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has learned it can use the TTP as leverage against Pakistan. It likely sees the TTP’s roughly 12,000 fighters as a useful ‘force in being’ for any future conflict inside Afghanistan itself. This nexus isn’t going away,” he adds.

The security concern extends beyond the TTP. The UN assessment points to a symbiotic relationship between the TTP, BLA and al Qaeda, as well as cooperation involving other militant networks, including East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

“The Taliban are supporting the TTP and providing safe haven to various terrorist networks, including al Qaeda, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, ISKP and ETIM,” says journalist Khan. “If the Taliban are allowed to govern Afghanistan as they wish, they would not only destroy Afghan society but also put the entire region in danger.”

The UN assessment, however, says the Taliban are actively fighting ISKP, the most prominent internal armed threat to the regime. The paradox is striking: the regime is fighting one militant threat while supporting another.

For Pakistan, that ambiguity is becoming increasingly difficult to accept. “Pakistan tried applying various forms of pressure and leverage to get results, and when that did not work, bilateral engagement channels were frozen from October 12 onward. The border has been closed, and there is no trade taking place between the two countries at all,” says Mansoor.

A relationship once viewed in Pakistan as a potential strategic opportunity is increasingly defined by mistrust. Yet geography makes separation impossible. The two countries share borders, history, trade routes and millions of personal connections. “Given the 2,600-kilometre border and deep civilisational ties between the two countries; the Pak-Afghan ties have to become something like a special relationship,” says the former diplomat. “But for that to happen, the Taliban need to demonstrate sustained commitment to making this border region genuinely free of terrorism. That requires a constitutional framework, which the Taliban still have not developed in five years.”

The unfinished Taliban project

While the Taliban may draw some satisfaction from having held power for five years, controlling territory is not the same as building a state. Afghanistan, according to experts, cannot achieve lasting peace, stability or prosperity under a system built on exclusion, medieval social norms, support for transnational militant groups and tightly centralised rule. The Taliban, they argue, must move beyond the politics of survival and recognise that a stable Afghanistan requires inclusive governance, respect for basic rights and a meaningful role for its people, especially women, in shaping the country’s future.

Regional connectivity and international recognition will also require engagement, rather than isolation. Independent observers believe the Taliban need a political vision that responds to the aspirations of Afghans, builds constructive ties with neighbouring countries and defines Afghanistan’s place in the wider world. Without such a shift, their grip on power may endure, but the country risks remaining trapped between international isolation and growing unrest at home.

A sin of darkness

By Farrukh Kamrani |

Load-shedding alters the state of my consciousness. When the lights go off, I cease to be the same person I was. So if I did something wrong with that person in one of those narrow alleys of our neighbourhood that night, the electric company should be blamed for it.

I still can’t believe that I stooped low enough to corner that miserable, ugly creature. I tend to disagree with Shakir the Lame that looks become immaterial when it is dark. She was close to Lulu—a diminutive young chap with a face like a chimpanzee.

Mark my words: People who resemble monkeys are mean, mischievous and malevolent to the highest degree. People who are short in stature are cunning, as a rule. Not all short men are thieves, but every thief I have ever known was short.

Apart from being dwarfish, thieves have very alert minds and sharp eyes. It is their job to keep an eye on people—or rather their belongings—and a thief knows everything about everyone.

Most members of the Organisation, myself included, knew

that Lulu, who lived in that poor neighbourhood with his mother and two unmarried sisters, was a petty thief who broke into shops. We often saw him returning on his motorcycle late at night, often with bulging bags dangling from the handlebars—the exploits of his nightly toils.

But we did not realise then that, being a thief, Lulu was also privy to all our secrets: he knew our roles in the Organisation; he knew where we ate, drank, pissed, and even where we tortured and killed our opponents and stashed our weapons.

I hated the fellow. His face always reminded me of those illustrations of our Darwinian ancestors. He also steered clear of me, though I often saw him dropping off his darling in the evening at an intersection a few streets away from her residence.

His girlfriend worked at a garment factory. She wore an abaya, but we assumed her private life was rather different from the image she presented.

In my long association with the Organisation, I had encountered only two types of people: those who began to run, weep, and beg when they saw

the muzzle of a gun pointed at them, and those who turned into statues of stone—silent and cold. Lulu’s lover belonged to the second category.

On that night, she had gone cold all over when I caught her hand in the dark, dingy recess outside the shuttered shop where an old butcher sold the meat of aged cows and buffalo calves. She had not uttered a word apart from a suppressed groan in that dark corner, where the smell of her cheap perfume commingled with the rotting smell of blood and discarded meat scraps.

I was sure that she had not recognised me—it was very dark in there, and even in the shadows I could tell that she had avoided looking at me during and afterwards. Later, she hurriedly dusted off her clothes and, clutching her bag, almost ran toward her house.

As I lit a cigarette, the electricity returned, and with it my senses. I soon began cursing myself for the escapade, which I had found thoroughly distasteful. The Organisation did not approve of such behaviour, and if my conduct were discovered, it could land me in serious trouble.

I could not sleep that night, and the next evening I stationed myself near the spot where Lulu usually dropped the girl off, just to find out whether she had recognised me. The couple did not show up that evening, and I returned to the spot the following day in an even greater state of agitation. Lulu eventually arrived. The girl alighted from the motorcycle, smiled at her lover, and turned into the alley as though nothing had transpired in its labyrinth two days earlier. As usual, neither the thief nor his companion looked in my direction. I heaved a sigh of relief and soon forgot the ugly couple altogether.

The months that followed were extremely turbulent as the government launched another crackdown, and the Organisation ordered us to go underground. It was during this operation that the forces raided the place where I was hiding. One night in July, our neighbourhood was once again plunged into darkness by what appeared to be an unusual power failure. I was sleeping in the attic when someone kicked me in the ribs.

I was later shifted to one of their safe houses—handcuffed and blind-

folded—and thrown into a dark cell. It took me a few minutes to realise that two other members of the Organisation were already groaning in that room.

We denied everything during the nightly interrogations, but at dawn, when they pushed us out of our cell, we found that they had already lined up a dozen people in the courtyard, their faces distorted by terror, torture, and lack of sleep.

Suddenly the gates were flung open. A jeep entered and pulled up right in front of the suspects. Three soldiers hopped out of the vehicle. Two of them were tall, well-built, fearsome-looking personnel, but the third was a small man whose military fatigues seemed several sizes too large for his tiny frame.

Unlike the other soldiers, his face was completely covered. He examined each of the suspects in turn while constantly whispering to the two formidable-looking officers.

When the veiled man turned to me, I recognised those monkey-like eyes blazing with hatred. In that instant, I understood everything. It was an identification parade. The veiled man was Lulu. And it was the end of the road for me.

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