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Those in AC offices of Islamabad cannot understand the severity of sea intrusion — Bux



An uncertain path awaits the next US President

Biden's successor will inherit a broad array of challenges, from navigating complex foreign policy issues to maintaining America's waning global hegemony

By HAMMAD SARFRAZ

As the US presidential election approaches its finale, the world is watching closely. Joseph Biden, the incumbent, beset by concerns over his age and a series of public gaffes, has been sidelined by his own party. Once the presumptive nominee, the president now appears more as a surrogate.

This dramatic turn of events has paved the way for Vice President Kamala Harris to take centre stage in a fiercely contested race against Donald Trump, the former president who is making history as the first convicted felon to seek the White House. Having survived an assassination attempt and decisively outperformed Biden in the first presidential debate—laying bare the president's cognitive decline—Trump seized the momentum, energised his base, and clinched the Republican nomination for the third time.

For Harris, the stakes couldn't have been higher. She steps in to replace Biden, who was trailing his firebrand predecessor in nearly all national polls. Harris, too, has made history as the first Black woman and the first person of South Asian descent to secure the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency. She also becomes only the second vice president in US history, after Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, to enter the race after the sitting president stepped aside. But the question remains—has Harris truly emerged from the shadow of her soon-to-be former boss? History offers a cautionary tale—Humphrey, too, struggled to distance himself from President Lyndon Johnson and ultimately lost to Richard Nixon. If history repeats itself, Harris could face a similar fate—a scenario that should be the worst nightmare for her party's leadership at this point. Despite an energetic performance at the Democratic National Convention—held in Chicago, evoking memories of the 1968 gathering that nominated Humphrey—Harris has managed only a statistical tie with Trump in most battleground states. Even the addition of Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, selected as her running mate to appeal to Middle America, has done little to improve her standing in the polls.

“While Biden may claim that his presidency has made America safer, the reality paints a different picture. The world is arguably less secure, partly due to policy deficiencies during his term

Trump, the former president who was ousted in 2021, continues to cling to his divisive rhetoric, now more aggressively courting his base with the familiar dog whistles they've come to expect. He has not shied away from expressing his isolationist views and subtle plans to undermine democracy at home. If the chaotic end to his presidency remains fresh in the public's memory, Trump's recent remarks should be alarming. Urging his Christian supporters, he hinted at a potential end to the electoral process if he wins the White House again. The ex-president's penchant for provocative language is causing him trouble, particularly after he questioned his opponent's race during an interview. He continues to fuel his campaign with his salesman instincts, frequently resorting to hyperbole that has been known to enrage his voter base.

Interestingly, following Biden's unexpected departure from the race, the Trump campaign was caught off guard and has been struggling to devise a strategy against a new, relatively unknown opponent from the opposite gender. Since then, the former president's political strategists have focused on casting Kamala Harris as a California liberal with limited accomplishments as vice president. Harris's challenge is to establish her own identity before Trump does it for her. So far, Harris, as the lead candidate for the Democratic Party, has struggled to differentiate herself from Biden, and many analysts believe this will continue to be a challenge given her role as his vice president and for-

mer running mate. The election now hinges on a narrow pool of undecided voters whom both candidates are trying to persuade. The outcome will largely depend on how effectively each candidate can appeal to an increasingly divided electorate in battleground states.

On the global front, the incoming president will confront a range of challenges, from managing intricate foreign policy issues to grappling with America's declining superpower status.

No surprises for the world

For a world besieged by conflict and chaos, this US presidential election holds some significance but few surprises. Both candidates have largely avoided detailing their foreign policy strategies for addressing the myriad challenges awaiting the next occupant of the Oval Office. Conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza show no signs of slowing.

Biden, who has publicly criticised Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for not doing enough for peace, appears increasingly fatigued. In a glaring contradiction to his stated commitment to ending the conflict, the administration's unwavering support for supplying ammunition to Israel—used in the killing of more than 40,000 Palestinians—has led some to question his credibility as a genuine advocate for peace. As his vice president, Harris has supported the administration's stance on Israel's right to self-defense, and if elected, she may continue this policy of unconditional support. Trump, on the other hand, has been explicit in his backing of Netanyahu.

Both candidates also offer contrasting approaches to handling the conflict in Ukraine.

On China, both Trump and Harris are anticipated to adopt a tough stance. Trump's approach is likely to stay the course, aiming to deter Beijing as he did during his previous term. Harris, who has yet to unveil any groundbreaking proposals to set herself apart from Biden, is also expected to endorse a tougher policy on China should she succeed him.

If Trump returns, longstanding alliances like NATO and a broad network of European and global partners

may face a potential reset. In contrast, Harris is likely to continue Biden's strategy of reassurance, aiming to maintain the dwindling list of allies in America's Western bloc—an approach that, while largely seen as futile, may temporarily serve as the only means to keep China's growing influence at bay.

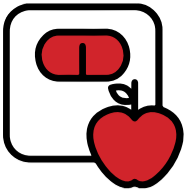
Foreign policy challenges

On matters of foreign policy, the US president wields considerable power. And while Biden may claim that his presidency has made America safer, the reality paints a different picture. The world is arguably less secure, partly due to policy deficiencies during his term. The president's hasty exit from Afghanistan is likely to haunt his legacy, with some predicting it could become the defining headline of his political epitaph. The region remains less secure and stable due to the abrupt withdrawal of US forces three years ago. While Trump stands to gain politically from what is viewed as America's most humiliating withdrawal since Vietnam, Harris will have much to defend, both now and potentially after the election if she succeeds.

“Regardless of who steps into Biden's shoes next year, the obsession with China is likely to remain at the centre of US foreign policy

The Middle East, a volatile and strategically crucial region, has consistently shaped presidential legacies. From Jimmy Carter to Joe Biden, it has left an indelible mark on American foreign policy and those who have crafted it. In Biden's case, he leaves a fractured region with a deadly conflict that has been raging in Gaza.

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A GOLDEN DAWN

September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, an annual opportunity to create awareness of the impact of cancer in children and their families around the world. This year the campaign uses gold colour to honour childhood cancer warriors. Here's a look at the resilience of children fighting cancer



By ALINA SADAF

A cheerful 8-year-old girl walks into my clinic. Set between a Japanese-style bob is a pair of almond shaped eyes and just below them is a wide smile. Mehreen is here for her one-year follow up after completing treatment for osteosarcoma of her left lower leg. She hops onto the examination table with ease. You will need an x-ray to tell that Mehreen is miss-

ing a part of her tibia (a long bone in the leg) that has been replaced with a metallic rod screwed into the remaining bone. A year ago, she was in the throes of an intensive treatment for her cancer. There were many sleepless nights, loss of hair and bruises along her arms. Today, her hair is in full bloom, and she joyfully recounts her time at school where she is in first grade. Mehreen's story is a testament to the advances in



Delayed diagnosis and treatment abandonment continue to plague the survival of children with cancer in low- and low-middle income countries such as Pakistan. In fact, the survival of childhood cancer in resource-limited countries approaches only 20 per cent

cancer treatment for children and to the courage our young warriors and their families display daily. Childhood cancer is considered a rare disease that affects children and adolescents. Its impact on the patient and their families can be catastrophic. Many cancer treatments are intense and long (some up to 3 years), may require medications, surgery and radiation, and can be taxing on the whole family. Cancer is also an expensive disease to treat. Once a child survives cancer, they must continue to see their cancer doctor (paediatric oncologist) for several years after to monitor for recurrence of the cancer and to assess for long-term side effects of treatment. Despite these challenges, cancer is highly curable in children with survival rates above 80 per cent in high-income countries. Mehreen's case is a good example of a type of aggressive cancer that was successfully treated using modern treatment principles.

Shahzeb is a three-year old who was brought to our emergency room in a state of shock. He was as pale as the white sheet on his hospital bed. His pulses were thready, and he bore a look of dread in his eyes. His father stood anxiously at his bedside while a Pashto-speaking nurse translated the doctor's questions for him. The two had arrived by bus after a long journey from their home in South Waziristan. After almost a month of seeing local doctors, they had finally discovered that Shahzeb may have a form of blood cancer and they were referred to our hospital for treatment. The first month of Shahzeb's treatment was marred by recurrent visits to the emergency room with fever and a trip to the intensive care unit where he came very close to death due to a serious bloodstream infection. It was a joyous day when we told Shahzeb's father that his blood cancer had been cleared from his bone marrow. I recall

Shahzeb being smothered in kisses by his father in the clinic. However, their journey ahead was still long and they needed to stay in Lahore for his intensive treatment for an additional five months. At each clinic visit, the father was distraught about the financial state of his family at home. One day, Shahzeb did not show up in clinic for his scheduled follow up and chemotherapy appointment. When we called his father, he had taken Shahzeb home for a brief visit to deal with urgent financial issues. We came to a compromise with the father and asked him to return as soon as possible after completing his task. The following week, when I called his father again, he told me during sobs that Shahzeb had died a few hours before at a local hospital. He had developed a high-grade fever and shortness of breath for which he was taken to the local hospital, but he could not be saved as he needed a ventilator which was not available at the hospital. Delayed diagnosis and treatment abandonment continue to plague the survival of children with cancer in low- and low-middle income countries such as Pakistan. In fact, the survival of childhood cancer in resource-limited countries approaches only 20 per cent. Despite the availability of appropriate treatment in the major cities of Pakistan, many children are deprived of a chance at survival due to the lack of accessible medical care and the financial toxicity of liv-

ing away from their homes for extended periods of time. Shahzeb was a victim of his poverty and lack of access to care. A sixteen-year-old Abdullah came to my clinic during his treatment for Hodgkin lymphoma, stating that he had applied for college next year and that he did not see his future being dashed by cancer. He had also planned to take his high school examination on schedule. I asked him how he managed to study on his chemotherapy days. He replied, "in between episodes of vomiting." On the day that his treatment ended, his PET CT scan (a special time of cancer imaging) was scheduled in four weeks. He looked at me with a glint in his eye and said, "Don't worry, doctor, I know I have beaten cancer." I remember when I met him in clinic to give his imaging results, which were indeed showing a resolution of cancer, his eyes betrayed his usual cool demeanour when they filled with tears. We both rejoiced in his victory. Abdullah's hope in a bright future during the hardest battle of his life is inspiring for all of us. We are cheering for our young to make it to the finish line and to keep running towards a bright and healthy future.

The writer is a consultant paediatric oncologist at Shaikat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre Lahore, and is a Board Member of the Pakistan Society of Paediatric Oncology. All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writer



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Despite wielding considerable influence over Israel, President Biden has largely offered only lip service to the idea of peace in the region. Initially, he set a red line, warning that if crossed, it would jeopardise America's unconditional support for Israel in its efforts to root out Hamas following the October 7 assault. However, that red line proved to be more of a line in the sand, shifting as time went on. Not only did Biden fail to persuade Netanyahu to protect Gaza's civilian population, but he continued to supply the ammunition that was used to flatten the enclave. During this period, the president approved more bombs and jets for Israel and provided billions of dollars in aid, solidifying his role as the most significant supporter of Israel's military actions against Palestinians. Harris, as his vice president, has aligned herself with this stance, recently defending Israel's right to continue the fight. When assessing how Harris might differ, even slightly, from Biden, no issue—foreign or domestic—has received more scrutiny than the war in Gaza. Yet, there's been no credible indication that she would chart a different course as president. Trump, for his part, has shown no signs of seeking to de-escalate the conflict, which has resulted in an appalling death toll in Gaza. His administration was staunchly supportive of Netanyahu's policies, delivering the ultimate trophy to the Israeli leader in 2017 when Trump recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and announced the relocation of the US diplomatic mission from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. While Trump's record provides some clues about the future trajectory of his foreign policy, Harris, who has self-styled herself as a human rights hawk, has been less forthcoming about her doctrine. With just two months until the presidential election, the democratic nominee has yet to clearly

signal whether, as president, she would champion democracy and freedom abroad, or if she is a 'pragmatic internationalist' who might cautiously retreat from America's waning global dominance. Her campaign has offered little clarity on whether she would bring an end to the era of American hubris and reintroduce humility to foreign policy. While as vice president, Harris may have engaged with numerous world leaders, and her team might tout her as a foreign policy savant, experts remain sceptical. They view her as a neophyte who, if elected, would require a seasoned hand to guide her. Unlike Barack Obama, Harris does not have a vice president with prior foreign policy experience—questionable as Biden's influence on his former boss's policies may have been. Regardless of who steps into Biden's shoes next year, the obsession with China is likely to remain at the centre of US foreign policy. Since Trump's departure from office, that policy has remained largely unchanged. Some experts argue that Biden has even escalated the rivalry, ensuring that tensions with Beijing will continue to overshadow American foreign policy. Adding a fresh voice to the debate, Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate, recently criticised Biden's covert efforts to modify America's nuclear strategy. Stein condemned it as a calculated provocation for a new arms race, suggesting that there was no genuine or imminent threat from Beijing to justify such measures. Following this playbook, the next president appears set to escalate tensions with China rather than pursue a grand strategy of cooperation, potentially risking a Cold War-style rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Signs of this are already evident in recent actions by the Biden-Harris administration, including the escalation in the South China Sea, the chip

and trade wars, and changes in the nuclear strategy. However, if anyone in either camp had heeded Richard Nixon's warnings, they might have reconsidered these anti-China policies. Nixon, a Republican credited with opening diplomatic channels with Beijing in the 1970s, foresaw the 21st century as China's era and advocated for cooperation rather than confrontation. He cautioned that future presidents would need to carefully consider their approach to China and Russia, whose combined population of 1.5 billion could tip the balance against US interests. And that balance may shift against Washington in the long run. Russia and China have never been closer than they are now—a scenario Nixon had long warned against. On the Ukraine front, Biden's policy seems to be faltering as the conflict approaches its third year. The protracted war has led to significant financial burdens on America's European allies, who are debating whether to continue funding the conflict or reduce their contributions. Meanwhile, Ukraine has recently urged Western nations to provide more long-range missiles and lift restrictions on their use, including targeting airfields inside Russia. However, deploying such weapons could provoke a direct confrontation between the West and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. As Americans gear up for the November election, the incoming president will have significant implications for Ukraine, which is grappling with the most devastating conflict in Europe since World War II. Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate, has committed to supporting Ukraine. However, there is mounting criticism in Washington regarding President Biden's management of the conflict. Former President Trump has promised to resolve the crisis immediately upon taking office, potentially through peace talks that

might even require Kyiv to cede territory. The Republican candidate and many of his supporters have questioned the billions of dollars in aid Biden's administration has committed to Ukraine. What happens after January 20 remains uncertain, as both candidates have proposed plans that lack concrete details and may not offer a viable resolution to the conflict—at least not one envisioned by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has been advocating for a more aggressive stance against Russia, even as Putin appears to be inching closer to capturing the strategic logistics hub critical to Kyiv's war effort. Overall, the strategic rivalry with China is expected to remain a major foreign policy challenge for the incoming administration. The next president will have to navigate an increasingly strained relationship with Beijing, characterised by growing disputes over trade and security. Moreover, the new administration will face global scepticism regarding Washington's commitment to peace, especially if it does not take meaningful steps to resolve the conflict in the Middle East. This includes advancing a two-state solution that promises some form of independence for Palestinians.

The economic challenge
Calls for a global shift away from US dollar dominance are not new and are not limited to the BRICS club of emerging nations. However, recent geopolitical developments and rising tensions between the West, Russia, and China have intensified these discussions. While the dollar's eight-decade reign remains firmly entrenched, the growing movement toward regional currencies and, in some instances, actual transactions in these currencies should be a concern for the incoming US president. The ability to sustain global influence through the dollar will remain a key element of US foreign policy.

And as Washington increasingly weaponises the dollar, the momentum for de-dollarisation could intensify. Whether this trend gains substantial traction will largely depend on how Trump or Harris plans to utilise the dollar influence in the future. Similarly, in the ongoing trade war with China, the next president will confront a significant challenge. Increased tariffs on Chinese goods could translate into long-term costs that will ultimately be borne by US consumers. In a move designed to bolster his legacy ahead of the election he is no longer contesting, Biden imposed new tariffs on a range of Chinese imports, intensifying the already strained trade relations with Beijing. These tariffs affect products from electric vehicles to solar cells. Trump has proposed tariffs of between 10 and 20 per cent on most imports, with rates exceeding 60 per cent on Chinese goods. Although Harris has expressed opposition to Trump's approach, experts anticipate that she would likely continue Biden's trade policies if elected. At home, the health of the US economy plays a crucial role in its capacity to shape global events. While President Biden frequently touts the economy as the strongest in the world, many economists are raising concerns about soaring debt levels, persistent inflation, and a lag in advanced technology manufacturing. Harris positions her economic policy as a pathway to creating opportunities for the middle class. However, a significant segment of this class appears to be feeling the burden of decisions made by the Biden-Harris administration over the past three years. Trump, in contrast, presents himself as a saviour of blue-collar jobs, a promise he hopes will continue to resonate with his voter base and secure him another term.

The tech war
The tech trade wars between Beijing

and Washington expose vulnerabilities on both sides. For the US, the greatest challenge is the lack of insight into the decision-making processes of Chinese leadership. In response to the Biden administration's escalating restrictions on the sale of computer chips and chip making technology to Chinese companies, Beijing struck back in July by imposing its own export controls. It limited the export of gallium and germanium, two crucial metals used in chipmaking, electric vehicles, telecommunications, and weapons systems. For many in the industry, this move represented a worst-case scenario, highlighting Beijing's strategy to exploit its dominance in producing these vital materials. Yet, in practice, the feared supply disruptions for gallium and germanium have not materialised. Exports have continued, but with the added requirement of new permits from China. This situation underscores that the new export rules were likely designed more as a strategic warning by Beijing than a full-scale economic assault, signalling to the US and its allies that China is ready and able to retaliate if provoked. The incoming president will confront a complex dilemma in managing the escalating tensions with China across a broad range of issues. Imposing restrictions or countering Beijing's advances will inevitably come with significant costs for Washington. As a key figure in the Biden administration, Harris is already familiar with these potential repercussions. If she opts to continue her current boss's approach, she must prepare for the consequences, some of which are already apparent in China's reactions. Conversely, Trump has suggested that such measures could spark a new arms race, and given his track record, he may not hesitate to escalate tensions with China further if he returns to office.



PAKISTAN'S FIREWALL: EXPLAINED

Imposing a national internet firewall, the Pakistani government claims to be acting as an IT administrator, blocking spam and malware websites. But does this web management system in fact work more like online surveillance and invade users' privacy?

By **SINDHU ABBASI**

Pakistan has installed a national firewall that can track, block or significantly limit the visibility of content it deems is propaganda, a highly placed source in the ISP industry confirmed to *The Express Tribune*. “This is a geo-fencing firewall that will be able to track content in real time,” the source confirmed. “The previous firewall could slow down the internet, but this is much more advanced.” A geo-fencing firewall controls and restricts incoming and outgoing traffic by setting geographical limitations, such as China’s Great Firewall, which blocks

complaints about slow and patchy internet speeds. They also confirmed none of them had received an official notification or intimation about the installation. “Our biggest customers know why this is happening, so they have their solutions to maintain their operations,” said the source speaking to *The Express Tribune*. “We try to handle our critical customers by whatever technical solutions possible to ensure they are able to carry on with their operations.” But the biggest hit is being faced by call centres, who have to make international calls. “There is a lot of work stress and we do not have the resources to

rachi some years back when trucks would travel during day timings. The increase in the size and number of vehicles will choke the roads, and in the case of Pakistan, wreck the roads. Similarly, through a VPN, traffic routed through a longer route will send more and bigger data packets, choking the upstream. The problem with the minister’s statement is not that it is technically incorrect, but that this scenario could apply on a smaller, ISP level. Think about how internet speeds can appear slow late night; this is because users or traffic increase, and due

China and Russia are among the countries with similar national firewalls, but because their technology infrastructure is not like Pakistan’s, their speeds and connectivity are higher, reliable and can possibly take a hit from a firewall slowdown. Pakistan was ranked at 127 in internet speeds in the Ookla Speedtest Global Index 2023 report, while India was at 47, and China at 6.

Going back to the traffic analogy, if a city’s administration constructs roads for cars and bikes, publishes no plans for heavy traffic, doesn’t invest properly to upgrade these roads, uses dated material and methods, and there is lack of transparency and accountability surrounding the

is doing this through the services of Akamai, one of the CDN providers in Pakistan. If VPN use slows down the internet, as claimed by the minister, how is it that the speeds were worse in the past eight weeks, while the ban on X, due to which average users have increase VPN use, has been effective since February? Various news reports in July and August said that users in Pakistan had been facing slow internet speeds, especially with WhatsApp. “The government has enabled proxies [that reroute traffic to and from social media sites and hence slows it],” said the source in an interview to another daily

cessing applications other than X too. “We have experienced overall degradation in all internet services, and slowness in international traffic,” one of the sources said. According to the monthly updates, Pakistan is down four places in internet speed from last month, according to Ookla, a global standard of internet speeds. Pakistan had a median download speed of 19.7 in mobile internet, and 15.39 in fixed broadband. Compare this to China, which is at 122.27 and 207.66, respectively. Security “rights” versus privacy All these methods — geo-fencing, HTTP blocking, proxy servers — are actually basic network security tools employed on organizational levels to enhance cyber-security. The minister and other government officials have claimed that “almost every country” deploys firewalls. These claims have been fact-checked by Pakistani news outlets that prove that the US and the UK do not use firewalls and blocking on this level. The IT minister said that the government has the “right” to install a firewall in view of the increased cyber attacks. There is a difference between privacy and basic IT security practices. If you work at an organis-



For users to get good internet speed, various factors matter, including a strong technology infrastructure and high fibre connectivity, including fibre to the home (FTTH), which means fibre directly from ISP to the home

YouTube, Facebook and other websites and apps. It creates a virtual geographic boundary. All of Pakistan’s internet traffic already goes through content filtering, the source said. Almost three months after X was banned, people in Pakistan started complaining of slow and patchy internet. WhatsApp and Facebook have not been working on mobile data in the past month, and only marginally better on Wi-Fi and broadband. Then mid-July, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) invited bids for a “Next-Generation Firewall” that led to speculation about a firewall being implemented on the national level. However, on July 22, the PTA said that the bid (available on its website) was for the authority’s internal network. However, the source confirmed that the firewall has been deployed at the two upstream points that Pakistan has. Upstream, in internet terms, means a large ISP that acts as the main gateway for users in a country to connect to international servers such as that of Facebook or international websites. Through this main gateway, these two checkpoints then provide access to other small and large ISPs in the country. One of these two upstream checkpoints is owned by Pakistan Telecommunication Company Ltd called PTCL Pakistan Internet Exchange (PIE). The other is Transworld. The firewall itself has been enabled by the law enforcement, said the source. “We have no information about the make and the model, and where the firewall has been sourced from. All these details are highly confidential,” the source added.

Firewall or web-management system? After much criticism, the IT Minister first acknowledged that the “web management system” that Pakistan already had is being upgraded. But two other sources in the ISP industry when asked pointedly whether this is a firewall or not, confirmed that this is no “routine” upgrade but that a firewall has in fact been installed. All three sources confirmed an increase in customer

deal with this kind of situation,” the source added. Further, a web management system is a basic application that helps in managing a webpage, and placement of images, text and basic website code. This is a job description of a website manager. The minister and PTA chairman using this term is misleading. The IT minister used this term while speaking with the public, and a press release by the National Assembly on Aug 21 says the PTA told them that the “Web Management System” is being upgraded. Another press release on Aug 26 by the National Assembly says the PTA told lawmakers that it has installed a “web monitoring system” that is being upgraded. The term “Web Monitoring System” appears in the contract that Pakistan had with Sandvine, as reported in 2019 by CodaStory. It appears the government replaced it with “management” to dilute the surveillance aspect. VPN behind slow internet? The information technology minister, Shaza Fatima Khawaja, has also blamed the slow speeds on the increased VPN use. “When VPNs are used, traffic flows through the main internet path instead of the Content Delivery Networks,” she said. Here is how this works: CDNs are servers that are distributed geographically so that a user in, say, Pakistan, can access international websites or social media sites like Facebook in the shortest time possible. The main internet, that the minister talked about, would be when a user in Pakistan would try to access servers of Facebook, based in the US or a farther location, directly. This longer path will take more time. “This leads to upstream choking, which means that users are taking up more internet traffic using VPNs than they would if they were using CDNs,” the ISP source told *The Express Tribune*. An analogy would be that the government has constructed a road suitable for cars and bikes; but then there is an influx of big vehicles, causing traffic jams, similar to what happened in Ka-

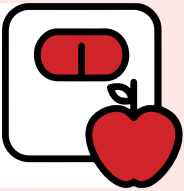


to which many telcos started offering cheap night data packages to make bank. But the minister’s statement presents an incomplete picture of the internet traffic system for an entire country. For users to get good internet speed, various factors matter, including a strong technology infrastructure and high fibre connectivity, including fiber to the home (FTTH), which means fiber directly from ISP to the home. Around two decades back, copper cables were the most commonly used cables for internet connectivity in the world, the kind still used in PTCL’s wired connections, in which we use a LAN cable. Now, fiber has replaced copper in developed countries, providing high speeds. But Pakistan has a miserably low fiber-teledensity, at 0.45 percent, the IT ministry said in March. There are only 1.6 million FTTH subscribers. This means that not only the baseline speeds are low, but losses become much higher in the events of any man-made or natural disruptions.

entire process—whose fault is it? Do we blame the increased flow or the government? **Fact-checking government claims** Before these recent statements about the management system and VPNs, both the minister and the PTA feigned ignorance about the internet becoming slow. Now, the minister says it is happening because of VPN use. The use of VPNs is not just because of X, but also because users have widely reported social media sites as being slow without VPNs. “The government’s main aim through this firewall is to restrict access to social media sites,” confirmed the ISP source. And how is the government restricting access to these sites? A report by Bytes for All, published in February this year, analysed how the PTA blocks X. The report said the authority uses HTTP blocking, which means blocking on the website level, and other network procedures. They also suggested that the PTA

newspaper. Internet traffic is determined by internet routing protocols. These protocols are like traffic rules that work to ensure that data from a user’s computer to, say, WhatsApp’s server travels in the shortest time possible. And think of a proxy server as a tunnel; instead of traffic going through the best possible routes, now the government is forcing everyone to first pass through a tunnel, slowing down and congesting the flow. A new report by Bytes for All confirms that they detected internet traffic behaviour that could be an indicator of “Deep-Packet Inspection or a poorly configured firewall”. The report “Slow internet in Pakistan and the smokescreen of VPNs” found that the overall internet speeds and download at the user end, in fact, improved with VPNs. This shows, the report says, that the government has tinkered with the routine paths and ways through which the internet traffic travels. And this is why a common user has been forced to use VPN when ac-

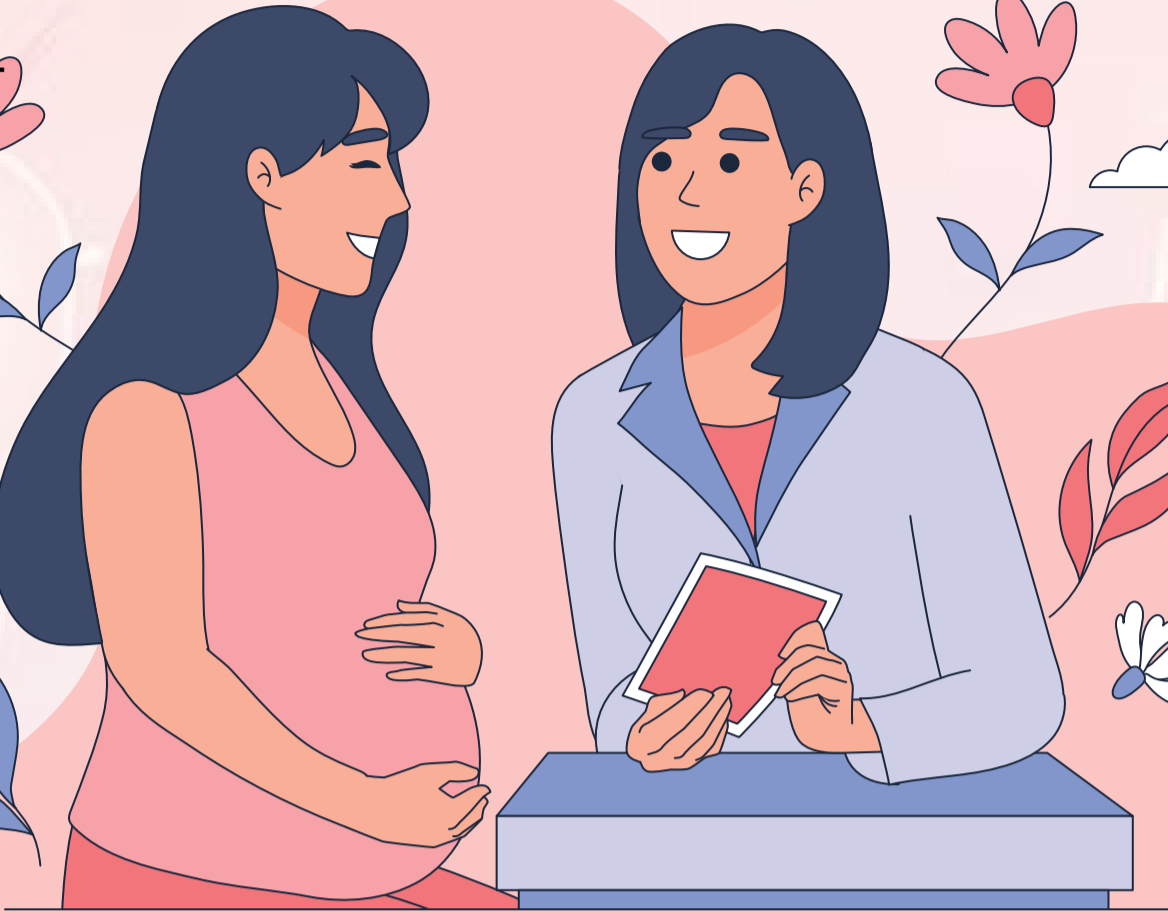
tion, the IT administrator has the “right” to block websites for users that are spam or could contain malware, because they could affect the entire organisation’s network. It is not the right of the administrator to remotely access your computer to read your messages on WhatsApp web or try to snoop on your Gmail password, just because they can. Further, cyber security is not increased through a centralised measure; it requires regular audits and upgradation of internet and network security at all government departments, at the Pakistani government’s servers, and basic IT trainings to at least the staff of sensitive departments. Pakistan now has the National Centre for Cyber Security, formed during the caretaker government. The PTA also launched the country’s first cyber security strategy in February this year, which the authority says will be implemented from 2023-2028. However, as of now, Pakistan’s cyber security at the basic level remains abysmal.



Beyond choice

Story by: **Nabil Tahir**

Millions of Pakistani women face unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions due to inadequate access to healthcare and family planning. Experts stress the importance of mobilising political will to empower women and create a safe environment for mothers to exercise their basic rights



Hina*, a 22-year-old mother of two from rural Sindh, tragically lost her third child due to complications during childbirth. Her story is one of the many heart-wrenching reminders of the devastating consequences of inadequate access to reproductive health services and family planning education in Pakistan. Millions of women in the country face risks due to a lack of knowledge and resources, leading to unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and maternal mortality.

The absence of reproductive health education and family planning services has far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the health and well-being of women but also the economic prosperity of families and communities. When women are unable to plan their families, they are more likely to experience poverty, malnutrition, and poor health outcomes, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Educating females about reproductive health and family planning is crucial for preventing such tragedies and empowering women to make informed decisions about their lives. In Pakistan, where only 34% of women use family planning methods and 40% lack access to female healthcare, the need for awareness and education is dire. The statistics are alarming: 4.2 million unplanned pregnancies and 2.2 million abortions annually, with young women desiring an average of four children but having only two due to lack of access to family planning services.

Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world with 208 million people and a population growth rate of 2.4% per year. The population dynamics pose challenges to national development, economic growth, and security. To address these challenges, it's essential to take the conversation to the parliamentary level, ensuring policies and programs support reproductive health and family planning initiatives. Parliamentarians have a critical role in championing women's rights and advocating for enhanced access to reproductive health services, particularly in underserved areas.

Recently, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) organised a seminar for Sindh's parliamentarians, a crucial step towards mobilising political will and action. However, this is just the beginning. Many more efforts are needed to educate individuals and policymakers about the importance of reproductive health and family planning. The consequences of inaction are too severe to ignore – we must act now to ensure a brighter future for Pakistan's women and girls.

The alarming reality

Pakistan faces a reproductive health crisis, with staggering numbers of unplanned pregnancies and abortions. According to a report by the Guttmacher Institute, 'Unplanned Pregnancy and Abortion in Pakistan', 50% of pregnancies in Pakistan are unplanned, while the World Health Organization reports that one in five pregnancies end in abortion. This translates to approximately 2.2 million abortions annually, with a devastating 80% being unsafe, leading to serious health complications and even death. In fact, unsafe abortions account for 12% of maternal deaths in Pakistan, as per the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey.

The root cause of this crisis lies in the lack of access to family planning services. According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey by National Institute of Population Studies, only 35% of married women use modern contraceptive methods, while 20% have an unmet need for family planning. This means millions of women are unable to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, leading to a cycle of unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions.

The situation is exacerbated by a lack of access to female healthcare, with 40% of the population unable to access essential services. Improved supply chains and involvement of the private sector in underserved areas are crucial to address this gap.

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Pakistan has lower use of modern contraceptives compared to other countries in the region, with only 26% of women aged 15-49 years using a modern method

The power of family planning

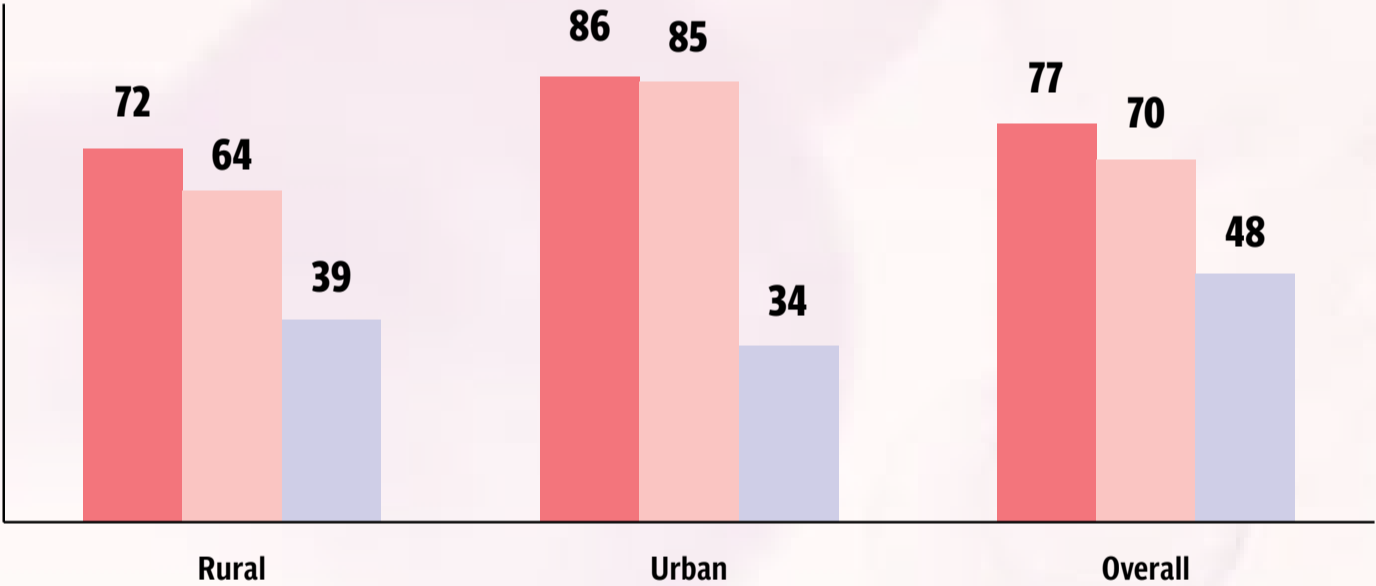
Family planning is a fundamental aspect of reproductive health, enabling individuals to make informed decisions about their fertility and plan their families. In Pakistan, where one in every five women desire to use contraceptives but lack access, family planning is crucial for preventing unwanted pregnancies, reducing unsafe abortions, and saving lives.

Family planning was declared a basic human right at the United Nations International Conference on Human Rights in 1968. This rights-based approach ensures that individuals have the right to determine freely and responsibly the number and timing of their children, and access to quality information and services, free from discrimination and coercion.

It prevents maternal deaths, saves children's lives, and ensures that every pregnancy is intended. Unfortunately, Pakistan has lower use of modern contraceptives compared to other countries in the region, with only 26% of women aged 15-49 years using a modern method. This highlights the need for improved

Indicators related to safe delivery (in %)

Antenatal Care Birth delivery in hospitals Post-natal Care



SOURCE: Estimated from PSLM 2019/20

access to family planning services, which is imperative for saving lives.

The UNFPA works closely with the Government of Pakistan to increase the up-take of family planning information and services. The goal is to enable an estimated 5.8 million women to become additional users of modern contraception.

Access to contraceptive information and services is central to achieving gender equality. When women are empowered to plan their families, they are better enabled to complete their education, have more autonomy within their household, and improve their earning power. This strengthens their economic security, education, health, and well-being, as well as that of their children and family.

By recognising the importance of family planning, we can ensure that individuals have the freedom to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, saving lives, empowering women, and building a brighter future for all.

Steps taken to address the crisis

Pakistani authorities have taken various steps to address the country's reproductive health challenges, recognising the critical need to improve access to family planning information and services. In collaboration with the UNFPA, the government aimed to enable an estimated 5.8 million additional women to use modern contraception by 2022, a significant step towards reducing the unmet need for family planning.

Pakistan has also committed to the Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) initiative, pledged to add 6.7 million new users of modern contraception by 2020 and achieve a contraceptive prevalence rate of 50%. This commitment demonstrates the government's dedication to addressing the country's high population growth rate and improving the health and well-being of its citizens.

Pakistan has also made commitment to the FP2030 with a vision that, "by the end of 2030, Pakistan envisions a society where women and girls are empowered and all couples enjoy basic rights to decide the number of their children freely and responsibly by maintaining a balance between their family size and resources, make informed choices to achieve a prosperous, healthy, and educated society."

The vision includes adapting and implementing evidence-based progressive policy reforms with political will and enabling an environment at all levels, universal access to services to lower fertility rates and address unmet need for contraception, address information and service needs specially to remote areas, gearing for Uniform Understanding of National Narrative, contraceptive commodity security and efficient supply mechanism, legislative support, institutionalisation of human development and system strengthening to sustain family planning efforts, and monitoring and evaluation for results and effectiveness.

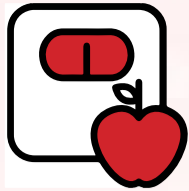
Given due consideration that population is a cross-cutting issue, which has its linkages with the most important issues relating to poverty, health, illiteracy, environment, climate change, economic instability, etc, the Government of Pakistan has developed a New National Narrative under the theme "Tawazin" (meaning middle of the course) and decide the family size according to the resources, enabling to fulfill the fundamental rights of all.

The UNFPA advocates widely at the policy level to ensure that family planning is embraced as a basic human right. This rights-based approach ensures that individuals can determine freely and responsibly the number and timing of their children, with access to quality information and services, free from discrimination and coercion. By empowering individuals, particularly women, to make

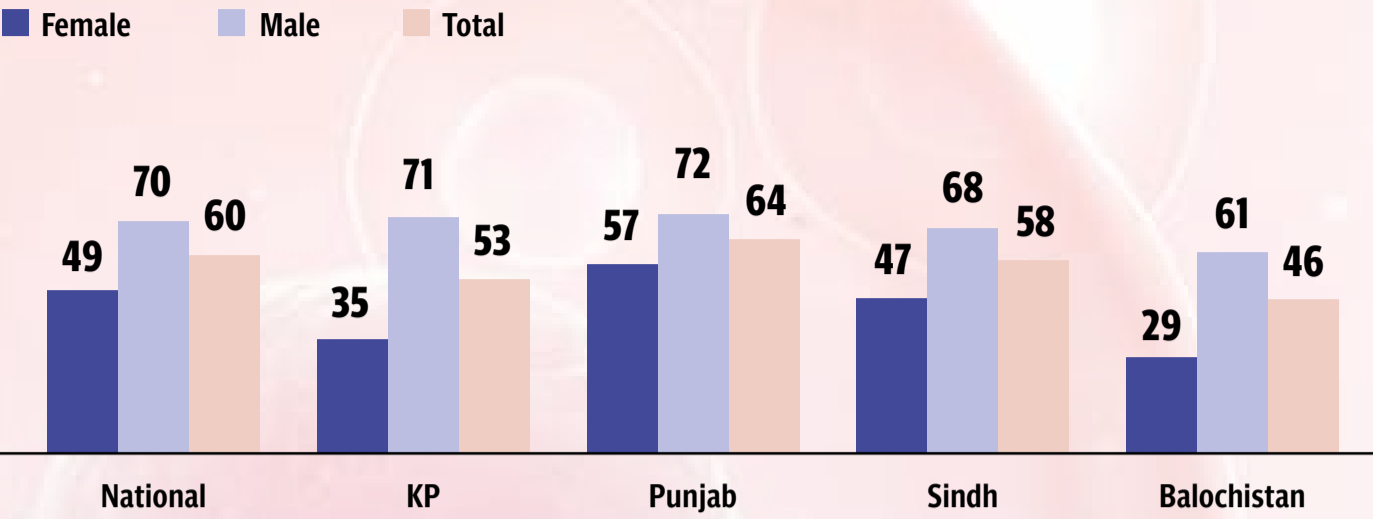


PDHS 1990-91 found that antenatal care was received during pregnancy for only **30% of births** – as low as **17% in rural areas**, whereas antenatal care from skilled health workers has significantly improved to **77% in 2020**

The biggest gap is in delivery in hospitals, the figure being **64% in rural areas** and **85% in urban areas**. In rural areas, a high percentage (**66%**) of all women consider that the distance to the health facility is a problem.



Literacy rate across provinces (Ages 10 & above)



SOURCE: Estimated from PSLM 2019/20

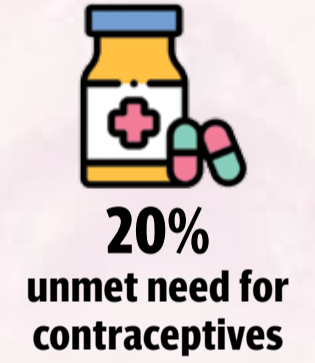
informed decisions about their fertility, UNFPA works to address the social and cultural barriers that often limit access to family planning services. Efforts are also being made to improve access to contraceptives, particularly for women who wish to use them but lack access. This includes increasing the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of family planning services, ensuring that individuals can obtain the information and resources they need to plan their families. By addressing these critical gaps in family planning services, Pakistani authorities and UNFPA aim to reduce the country's high rates of maternal mortality, unsafe abortions, and unintended pregnancies, ultimately improving the health and well-being of women and families across Pakistan.

Progress Made
Significant progress has been made in improving antenatal care in Pakistan, with coverage increasing from 30% in 1990-91 to 77% in 2020. However, despite this achievement, challenges persist in ensuring access to quality reproductive healthcare. Dr Rubina Ali, Assistant Country Representative for UNFPA, emphasised the need for a rights-based approach to family planning, and said, "Population management transcends mere control. It is about empowering individuals with the right to plan their families and access essential resources."

In Pakistan, where only 34% of women use family planning methods and 40% lack access to female healthcare, the need for awareness and education is dire

Dr Rubina urged parliamentarians to advocate for enhanced access to contraceptives and family planning services. The SDPI plays a crucial role in advocating for reproductive health policies and family planning in Pakistan. According to Syed Ali Wasif Naqvi, Senior Research Associate and Head of Policy Advocacy & Outreach at SDPI, "SDPI provides research-based insights and policy analysis that inform and strengthen the efforts of these organizations." SDPI's collaboration with UNFPA and similar organisations ensures that its research contributes to more effective advocacy and policymaking in healthcare, including reproductive health and family planning. Looking ahead, SDPI plans to continue its research and policy advocacy efforts in the broader healthcare sector, with a focus on data development for reproductive health. "Future initiatives may include more focused research on reproductive health challenges in Pakistan and developing policy briefs that guide effective interventions. SDPI aims to partner and collaborate with organizations that can drive systemic change and improve health outcomes nationwide," explained Naqvi.

Persistent challenges
Despite progress made in improving reproductive healthcare in Pakistan, several challenges persist. Accessibility remains a significant issue, particularly for women in rural or remote areas. They face constraints in accessing essential healthcare services, including quality antenatal and postnatal care, reproductive health, breast cancer treatment, and fistula treatment. The biggest gap is in delivery in hospitals, with only 64% of women in rural areas and 85% in urban areas delivering in hospitals. In rural areas, a staggering 66% of women consider distance to health facilities a major problem. According to Naqvi, the implementation of reproductive health policies in Pakistan faces several challenges, including cultural barriers, lack of awareness, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and insufficient funding. "Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes increasing public awareness, enhancing healthcare services, and ensuring that policies are culturally sensitive. The importance of community engagement and the need for stronger governance to ensure that policies are effectively translated into practice cannot be ignored," added Naqvi. He also emphasised the crucial role of the private sector in expanding access to reproductive health services, particularly in underserved areas. "The private sector has a key role in expanding access to reproductive health services by partnering with public health organizations and supporting public health initiatives, particularly in underserved areas. SDPI suggests that incentivizing private



Only 34% of women aged 15-49 years reported using any family planning method



40% of the population lacking access to female healthcare, the need for improved supply chains, and the importance of involving the private sector in underserved areas. 4.2 million out of 12 million pregnancies being unplanned and 2.2 million ending in abortion annually

healthcare providers through public-private partnerships could enhance service delivery," he said, adding that, collaborations with the private sector should focus on capacity building and service expansion, especially in rural and underserved regions. "This will ensure that reproductive health services are accessible to all and help bridge gaps in service provision and improve overall health outcomes."

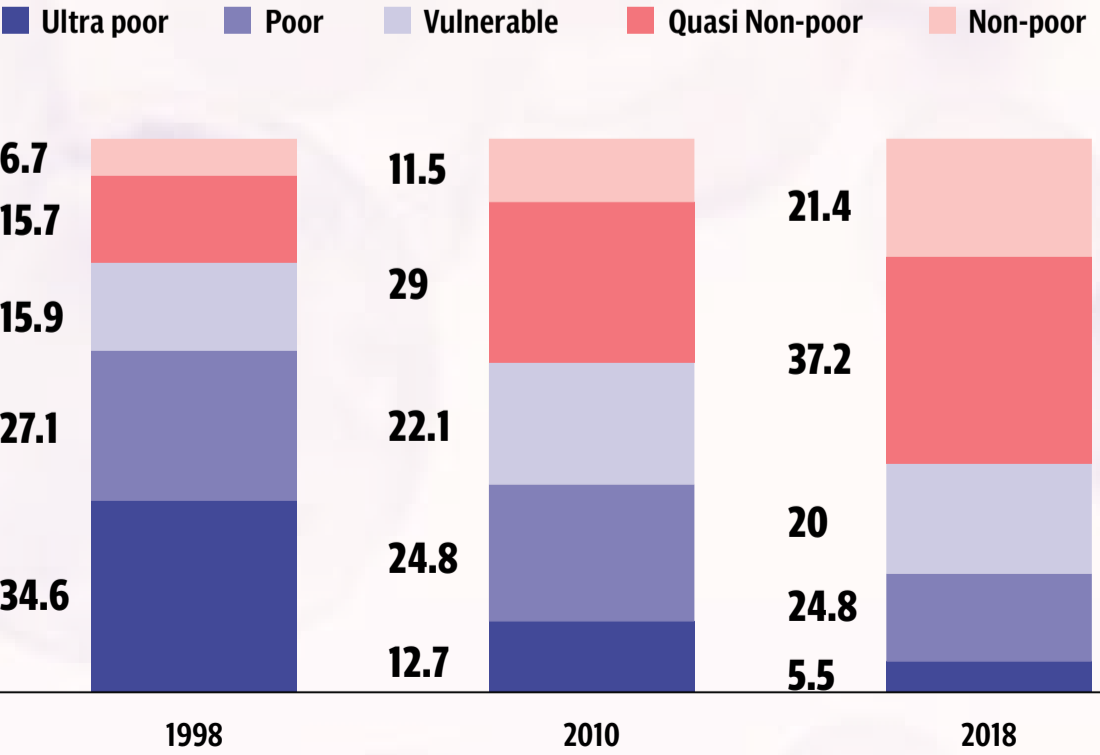
The unfinished agenda
Huge disparities persist between young women's desires and their reality when it comes to reproductive health in Pakistan. On average, women desire four children, but the reality is that they have only two. This significant gap has far-reaching implications for reproductive health outcomes and highlights the unfinished agenda in this critical area. According to Naqvi, "Although SDPI's direct involvement concerning family planning is limited, the organisation recommends integrating reproductive health into broader healthcare and development policies." He emphasised that SDPI's research in healthcare shows that infrastructure, improving data collection methods, and building a multi-sectoral collaboration can help overcome challenges in reproductive health policy implementation. "SDPI advocates for evidence-based policy that reflects the unique socio-economic context of Pakistan," said Naqvi. Naqvi also highlighted the crucial role of education, particularly girls' education, in improving reproductive health outcomes. "Education, especially for girls, is crucial in improving reproductive health outcomes. Educated women are more likely to make informed decisions about their health and family planning," he said, adding that SDPI advocates for girls' education and enrollment of out-of-school children. "Our prime focus is on the policies that promote girls' education as a means to improve reproductive health," said Naqvi. Underscoring the empowering effect of education on women, he said, "Education empowers women to understand and exercise their rights, leading to better health outcomes and more sustainable development."

The role of parliamentarians
Parliamentarians play a vital role in championing women's rights and advocating for enhanced access to reproductive health services. Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri, Executive Director of SDPI, said, "Access to sexual reproductive health and family planning services is not only a matter of public health but also crucial for promoting sustainable economic growth. Parliamentarians play a key role in policy-making that will lead to a more balanced population growth and a better future for Sindh." Dr Suleri stressed the importance of mobilising dialogue on political will and enabling environment for the successful implementation of the National Action Plan on Family Planning and the Family Planning 2030 (FP2030). Shaheena Sher Ali, Sindh Minister for Women Development, reaffirmed the Sindh government's commitment to working on family planning and reproductive health awareness as fundamental rights: "The Sindh government will implement policies in the province that promote reproductive health and underscore the connection between population and sustainable economic growth. As members of the Sindh Assembly, we must ensure that every citizen in Sindh has access to the reproductive health services they need, especially in rural areas." Dr Jamil Ahmad Chaudhry, Program Specialist at UNFPA, highlighted the urgent need for parliamentary engagement to achieve the Council of Common Interests' goals, addressing key challenges such as lack of access to female healthcare and the need for improved supply chains. Naqvi highlighted that through policy dialogues, advocacy initiatives, conferences, and collaborative projects, SDPI ensures that its research reaches key decision-makers. "Our partnerships with UN agencies and other international bodies help align national policies with global best practices, including those related to healthcare including our recommendations for female healthcare," he shared.

What to expect?
The path forward requires sustained efforts and collective action. As Naqvi said, "We plan to maintain our efforts in providing data-driven insights and facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues. With our research informing policy and practice, we can drive progress towards achieving the goals outlined in the FP2030 framework." This commitment to evidence-based decision-making will be critical in addressing the complex reproductive health challenges facing Pakistan. "At SDPI, our strategy involves around building stronger networks, engaging in capacity-building initiatives, and ensuring that the focus on SRH and FP remains a priority in the national discourse," said Naqvi. The call to action remains: to bridge the gaps, prioritize women's and girls' health, and ensure every individual's right to reproductive health and family planning. The journey ahead is long, but collective efforts can ignite transformative change, empowering individuals, communities, and the nation to thrive.

*Name changed to protect identity

Poverty bands overtime in Pakistan from 1998-2019 (%distribution)



SOURCE: PIDE Report 2021



WHEN AMBITION FALLS SHORT OF EXECUTION

Anubhav Sinha's latest venture teases with potential but falls short of delivering a truly compelling narrative. It is an ambitious yet uneven portrayal of a real-life crisis, where bold intentions are stifled by a lack of focus and depth. Political shenanigans aside, it is a missed opportunity in crafting what could have been a powerful drama

By SHAFIQ UL HASAN SIDDIQUI

Anubhav Sinha has built his reputation on crafting films that stir the pot, tackling real-world issues with an unapologetically bold approach. With a resume that includes *Mulk*, *Anek*, *Article 15*, and *Bheed*, he's proven himself a master at weaving compelling narratives with a strong social message. His latest venture, *IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack*, appears to continue this trend, delving into the real-life hijacking incident of 1999. However, the execution leaves much to be desired.

For much of the series, Sinha seems overly focused on presenting a multitude of perspectives without delving deep into any of them. The result is a narrative that, while ambitious, feels disjointed and superficial. The series is based on the real events surrounding the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight and the subsequent week-long standoff in Kandahar. The plot attempts to navigate the complexities of the situation, exploring the negotiations between the hijackers and the Indian government. Yet, as the series unfolds, it becomes clear that the storytelling is more preoccupied with the spectacle than with crafting a compelling, cohesive narrative.

The ensemble cast, featuring heavyweights such as Naseeruddin Shah and Pankaj Kapur, initially promises much. Yet, despite their formidable talent, the characters fail to transcend beyond mere archetypes. They are underutilised, often relegated to delivering lines that lack depth and nuance. Even the presence of actors like Arvind Swami and Manoj Pahwa, who typically shine in Sinha's projects, cannot elevate the material. Their roles are sketched too thinly, resulting in performances that feel restrained and uninspired.

The series' narrative is further bogged down by its attempt to weave in numerous subplots and historical contexts. Flashbacks, archival footage, and dispassionate voiceovers are employed to provide a backdrop of geopolitical tensions and historical events. However, these elements are often handled



The series is ultimately weighed down by its lack of focus and depth. While it offers a few moments of brilliance, it fails to coalesce into a cohesive, impactful narrative. In the end, *IC 814* serves as a reminder that sometimes, even the best intentions need to be grounded in a more disciplined approach to storytelling

clumsily, detracting from the central plot rather than enhancing it. The result is a confusing patchwork of scenes that lack the necessary cohesion and emotional weight.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the series is its exploration of the media's role during the hijacking. However, this subplot, much like the others, is mishandled. What could have been a sharp critique of media ethics and respon-

sibility is reduced to a superficial commentary on the print versus television debate, with dialogues that border on the ludicrous.

The series also depicts the struggles of moral complexities faced by those in power during the hijacking. The dilemmas of the Indian forces, balancing the immediate safety of the hostages against the long-term repercussions of negotiating with terrorists, are ripe for

exploration. Yet, the writing falls short, reducing these weighty issues to predictable tropes and clichés.

In this intriguing web series, Sinha tries to balance political nuance with dramatic pacing but struggles to achieve either. The narrative's shifting focus between various perspectives often feels more like a convenience than a deliberate storytelling choice. The series aims to dissect the political intricacies and ethical quandaries of the situation but ultimately delivers a muddled and uneven portrayal.

Despite its shortcomings, the series does have moments of genuine tension and intrigue, particularly in scenes involving the negotiations. Manoj Pahwa stands out as Mukul Mohan, the chief negotiator, bringing a unique blend of intensity and humour to the role. Vijay Varna also delivers a commendable performance as the flight captain, capturing the character's internal struggle with restraint and subtlety.

From the vantage point of a discerning viewer, *IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack* feels more like a documentary than an engaging, performance-driven cinematic experience. The narrative leans heavily on historical recounting, often at the expense of delivering the kind of intense, character-centric storytelling that could have elevated this series into something truly compelling.

There are, however, a few moments that manage to rise above the otherwise flat narrative. Take, for instance, the poignant exchange where Pankaj Kapur's character questions Naseeruddin Shah about the lives of the passengers—a scene that stands out for its understated power and the palpable tension between two veteran actors. It's one of the few instances where the series truly breathes, allowing the performers to showcase their craft in a way that captures the audience's attention.

Another gem is the seemingly mundane yet oddly charming conversation between Arvind Swami

and Manoj Pahwa about coffee and tea, which serves as a brief respite from the heavy atmosphere. It's a rare moment of levity amidst the chaos, subtly highlighting the absurdity of normalcy in a crisis.

Manoj Pahwa's portrayal of a shrewd negotiator is undoubtedly one of the series' high points. His ability to balance seriousness with a touch of humour adds a unique dimension to his character, making his scenes some of the most engaging to watch. Kumud Mishra's insistence on lighting up a cigarette during a tense moment also injects a sliver of personality into an otherwise rigid narrative structure.

But these moments, as refreshing as they are, are few and far between. The series often struggles to maintain a consistent rhythm, frequently oscillating between being a dry historical recount and a dramatic re-enactment. This lack of balance makes *IC 814* feel disjointed, leaving the audience yearning for more of the nuanced performances that are teased but never fully realised.

This real life based web series delivers sporadic flashes of brilliance within a framework that too often resembles a history lesson rather than a dynamic, character-driven drama. It's a missed opportunity, particularly given the talented cast at Sinha's disposal, and leaves one pondering what might have been had the series fully committed to its dramatic potential.

One of the most glaring disappointments in the web series is its lack of emotional depth, but perhaps even more jarring is the portrayal of its antagonists—the hijackers. The villains, who should be the driving force behind the tension and drama, come across as disappointingly shallow and underdeveloped.

Rather than being the menacing figures that one might expect in a narrative centered around a hijacking, these characters appear confused and unconvincing. Their performances lack the gravitas and conviction necessary to make their

presence felt, leaving them seeming more like placeholders than pivotal players. It's as if they are struggling to find their footing, unsure of their motivations or the weight of their actions.

At times, the hijackers even appear miscast, as though they've stumbled into the wrong genre altogether. This casting choice further detracts from the overall tension of the series, undermining what could have been a compelling exploration of fear and desperation. Instead of formidable foes who command attention and provoke unease, we are left with characters who barely register, failing to elevate the stakes or deepen the narrative.

Ultimately, this portrayal of the villains is a significant misstep in an otherwise ambitious series, one that regrettably contributes to its lack of emotional intensity and dramatic impact.

More than for its production value, the series is gaining momentum more for its propaganda against Pakistan element [which is nothing new in Indian productions] and the outrage against it. Netflix declares that it will add new disclaimers to the Indian series *IC-814: The Kandahar Hijack* following backlash over its portrayal of the 1999 hijacking of Indian Airlines flight 814. The series, which fictionalises the event, was criticised on social media and by the Indian government for inaccurately depicting the Muslim hijackers as Hindus. The code names used in the show resemble those of the actual hijackers, which further fuelled the controversy.

In response to the outcry, Netflix officials were summoned by India's information and broadcasting ministry. The platform later stated it would update the disclaimer to clarify the real and code names of the hijackers to avoid misleading the audience. Monika Shergill, vice president of content at Netflix India, confirmed this change in a statement.

The series, based on the book *Flight into Fear* by Captain Devi Sharan and journalist Srinjoy Chowdhury, drew significant criticism from social media users and members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who were in power at the time, have accused the series of portraying the hijackers in a positive light and misleading viewers into believing they were Hindu. They would probably be happy to see the series banned.

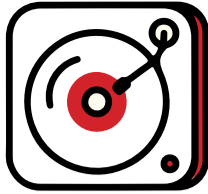
The controversy led to the hashtag #BoycottNetflix trending on X. Netflix, as well as other streaming platforms have faced similar complaints from Hindu groups in the past, who argue that their content often offends the sentiments of India's majority religious population. This incident underscores the ongoing tension between creative expression and religious sensitivities in India.

Nevertheless *IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack* is a classic case of ambition exceeding execution. Anubhav Sinha's intention to create a thought-provoking drama is evident, but the series is ultimately weighed down by its lack of focus and depth. While it offers a few moments of brilliance, it fails to coalesce into a cohesive, impactful narrative. In the end, *IC 814* serves as a reminder that sometimes, even the best intentions need to be grounded in a more disciplined approach to storytelling.

Shafiq Ul Hasan Siddiqui is an avid movie buff, and film and drama critic and a digital inbound marketer. He tweets @shafiqulhasan81

All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writer





HOW 'BLACK MYTH : WUKONG' IS WRITING THE RULES

China's AAA debut redefines industry norms with record-smashing fusion of ancient lore, high-octane gameplay

By HAMZA RAO

On August 20, China made a dazzling entrance into the global AAA video game industry — long dominated by Western titans — with 'Black Myth: Wukong', a game that has quickly shattered records and set the gaming world ablaze with its distinctive, as it were, 'Chinese characteristics'.

If President Xi Jinping's vision of national renewal and international stature hinges on "telling Chinese stories well," then Black Myth: Wukong serves as the perfect envoy, capturing the full spotlight of top video game publications such as IGN and PC Gamer.

Developed by the previously obscure Game Science, backed by Tencent, the game is a high-budget, blockbuster title that sold over 10 million copies worldwide within three days of its release — a dizzying success given that it was the first 'premium' production of the company. The game has already cashed in a jaw-dropping \$800 million, with over 18 million units flying off the shelves within just two weeks of its release. That's more than a tenfold return on the \$70 million poured into the game's development over six years.

However, based on the legendary 16th-century Chinese novel Journey to the West, the title is more than just a game — it's an impossibly breathtaking tour de force blend of ancient storytelling, cutting-edge technology, artistry and a celebration of Chinese cultural heritage.

While Journey to the West has been adapted many times over, from television to comics, Black Myth stands as the first massive blockbuster game rooted in Chinese tradition, crafted by a homegrown studio.

A milestone for the Chinese gaming industry, the game also offers a thrilling glimpse into the future of layered storytelling in the AAA game industry, where often puerility sells and the money is doled out on targeting the "kidults".

Unlike many AAA games that often receive the flak for appealing to an infantilised, consumer-driven audience — littered with merchandise and shallow narratives — Black Myth resists the pull with its com-



plex, sophisticated requirements in, as it were, an 'interactive ancient mystical world'.

The player steps into the shoes — or rather, the fur — of Sun Wukong, the legendary Monkey King, in the mystical world. As the game opens, you're flung into epic battles where heaven and Earth tremble and even the gods take note. Armed with the fabled "Jin Gu Bang", players must face foes like Erlang Shen, a three-eyed warrior-god, whose axe can slice through mountains.

Drawing heavily from the punishing yet rewarding "Soulslike" genre, the game focuses on intense, high-stakes combat with colossal, mythical boss battles. True to form, death in the game, rather than an end, becomes a cycle of rebirth — a fitting metaphor in a game steeped in Buddhist philosophy.

Despite being tailored and reenacted for avid gamers, those who have read the novel will see its timeless narrative running throughout the 40 hours of playtime, giving it a lived-in authenticity even for players unfamiliar with the tale.

Unlike most modern action games, Black Myth forgoes the typical open-world structure with no cluttered mini-maps and endless checklists of quests. The game thrusts players into uncharted territories, where getting lost in the ancient mythical world of China is both thrilling and terrifying.

Each step through a perilous mountain pass or murky swamp becomes a leap of faith.



Nonetheless, your curiosity is rewarded as hidden areas known as "Obsessions" are revealed only through specific interactions or item collections. Again, the optional quests appear to be playing on the Buddhist theme of attachment with the objects symbolising the burdens of desire.

A striking feature of the game is its use of motion capture technology, which turns the movements of professional stuntmen into lifelike, virtual combatants while incorporating real-world martial arts.

Through the technology, the actions of professional stuntmen dressed in customised suits with reflective points are recorded from all angles, processed into virtual data and finally presented on in-game characters.

'Guochao' and the rise of China's AAA gaming

However, it may be noted that the game's triumph against all odds is



with creativity, energy, and flair. This was all the more evident when the trailer for the title was released in August 2020, amassing over five million views on IGN's YouTube channel, a website known for its focus on gaming.

The promotional video generated more than 10,000 applications from professionals across the country, eager to contribute to the project's development and design.

Feng Ji, the game's producer, made a distinctly nationalistic statement, asserting the game's intent to restore the Monkey King to his original name, Wukong: "The story is from China, but everyone refers to him as Goku ... we want the world to know that his real name is Wukong." The sentiment resonated with millions of gamers who watched the game unfold: "the pride of China."

The statement proved to be prescient. Historically, Chinese games often mirrored their Japanese or American counterparts. However, Black Myth: Wukong breaks this mould by embracing a distinctly Chinese narrative based on classic mythology.

Much like how the film Chang An blended modern animation with Tang dynasty poetry to great success, Wukong is helping to redefine Chinese popular culture. Moreover, in recent years, the appetite for a homegrown AAA game in China has been growing steadily. Since Steam opened its virtual doors to Chinese gamers in 2018, the landscape of gaming in the country has

shifted. With an influx of European and American titles, Chinese players found themselves craving more action, bigger worlds, and deeper gameplay.

Yet, despite a few notable attempts, these dreams seemed destined to remain out of reach — until now.

Arguably, Chinese video games are perhaps the ultimate embodiment of guochao.

Games rooted in Chinese culture and history have built massive followings, and even those not explicitly based on Chinese themes are increasingly adding local elements to win over players. Unlike in fashion, where guochao is still gaining momentum, the gaming industry has embraced it from the start. Since the 1980s, Chinese video games have been a driving force behind the rise of contemporary popular culture.

The production team behind Black Myth journeyed across China, meticulously scanning ancient buildings and relics to infuse every scene with historical authenticity. For example, in the trailer, the epic clash between Wukong and the dragon Kang Jinlong showcases an ancient temple inspired by the Dule Temple in Tianjin, a rare surviving relic from the Liao Dynasty.

The game's array of demons, demon kings, gods, and Buddhas all embody traditional Chinese aesthetics, creating a modern illustrated guide to creatures from The Classic of Mountains and Seas, a cornerstone of Chinese mythology. Moreover, traditional Chinese instruments like the guzheng, bowls, wooden clappers, and gongs feature prominently, with much of the soundtrack crafted using classic Chinese chord structures.

In one striking moment, the game introduces players to "The Destined One," injured and lying on the yellow sands. He is saved by a haunting folk performance from a headless monk, where the evocative line "Success and failure, life and death, all are beyond reason" leaves a deep impression on both the player and the narrative.

This brief and powerful performance alone has made waves, amassing over 10 million views on social media.

T Magazine's picks



Binge this week:
Kaos

TV Show



The overload of satiristic elements might get a tad irritating, but the performances are worth watching. Created by Charlie Covell (The End of the F***ing World), the modern version of Olympia, which is an alternative universe where Greek gods reign, could bounce off over the head. The best part is Goldblum. He uses all of his signature eccentric, weird charm as Zeus, and after you see the human side of Zeus, that's all you want to see. Without Goldblum, the show comes to a standstill. Watch it if you love Goldblum.



Watch this week:
Romance In Style

Movies



Hallmark refreshingly brings in a new storyline, about the important issue of body positivity, with a plus-size lady in the lead. A dramatic, yet realistic story with Ben Hollingworth as Derek, and Jaicy Elliot as Ella, playing each other very well. Having done away with a typical, stale plot, the film makes statements without preaching, and the romance was secondary but sweet. There is lots of fashion, love, a strong entrepreneur woman, fun friends and two excellent vamps in Jorja Cadence (Liza) and Laura Soltis (Claudia), to rev up things.



Listen this week:
Alibi by Sevdaliza

Song



Iranian-Dutch singer-songwriter and record producer Sevdaliza, Brazilian drag queen Pablo Vittar and French singer Yseult team up for the empowering and subversive new single Alibi with a blend of lyrics in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese, with bass tones and a heavy syncopated beat. The full-blooded tribute to womanhood, affirms sisterhood, threatens patriarchy and is about finding safety and support in each other, especially in a world that challenges a woman at all costs. This multilingual tapestry adds depth to the song, reflecting the complexity of human emotions and experiences.



Read this week:
The Pilgrims by Asif Nawaz

Books



Young, doctor turned civil servant Asif Nawaz's debut novel unfurls stories of four characters in different situations and circumstances, but in the same backdrop of the Kashmir dispute, Babri Masjid riots, minority rights and Sufi ideals in the shadows of colonialism religious beliefs and folk legends. Their journeys are the pilgrimages as a divorced Mehar returns to Lahore, Bina tackles an estranged relationship returning from the past, Feroze finds relief in his father's death and wants to make up for lost time, while Aariz's sorts out the philosophy of life.



INDUS DELTA'S DOWNSTREAM DILEMMA



Once thriving with life, the Indus Delta is now facing severe degradation due to reduced river flow, and unchecked sea intrusion. Over 88 percent of the delta's land turning saline has forced mass migrations and crippled local livelihoods. Despite some efforts, the absence of effective water management continues to threaten the region's ecological balance

By MUHAMMAD ABBAS KHASKHELI

Wadero Muhammad Dhandhal owns over 250 acres of agricultural land in Shafi Dhandhal village, located in the coastal Tehsil Jati of Sujawal. Despite his efforts to sell the land for Rs 500 per acre for a long time, he has been unable to find a buyer. "About five years ago, I leased my land to a local man for a five-year period, but he returned it to me within the first six months due to incurring losses."

"Who wants to incur losses?" he laments. "I tried to sell the land and went to great lengths to find a buyer, making announcements in Jati and nearby cities, publishing and distributing pamphlets, and doing everything possible. However, the land has become unproductive due to sea intrusion, making it unsellable. As a result, I'm now forced to work as a daily labourer in Jati."

According to a 15-month research study conducted by the US-Pakistan Centre for Advanced Studies in Water (USPCAS-W), it has been revealed that the Indus delta has shrunk by 92 percent from 12,900 square km in 1833 to merely 1,000 sq-km. Once known for its 17 creeks, the delta now has only two active creeks, which are also rapidly diminishing into the sea.

The research further investigated how sea intrusion affects the local population, uncovering that a staggering 76 percent of residents depend on underground water for their daily needs. Alarmingly, this water has turned brackish and saline across a vast 88 percent of the delta's area, posing significant health risks to the community.

Nadeem Mirbahar, expert IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management believes that the entire ecosystem of once thriving Indus Delta is breathing its last due to reduction in river water flow caused by construction of dams and structures upstream. "This has led to increased salinity, groundwater depletion and collapse of fisheries, agriculture and mangrove ecosys-



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tem. The resulting environmental decline has forced local communities to migrate as seawater encroaches on agricultural lands and economic conditions worsen."

Water scarcity in local canals

The coastal villages of district Sujawal are worst affected by the water scarcity in local canals which somehow have contributed in increasing sea intrusion as these canals used to provide freshwater to local water bodies including many lakes and finally tailed in seawater carrying silt and other useful particles that pushed the seawater back but most of such water carrying distributaries have been waterless for a long time.

Noor Muhammad Thehmore, the District Sujawal President of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum,



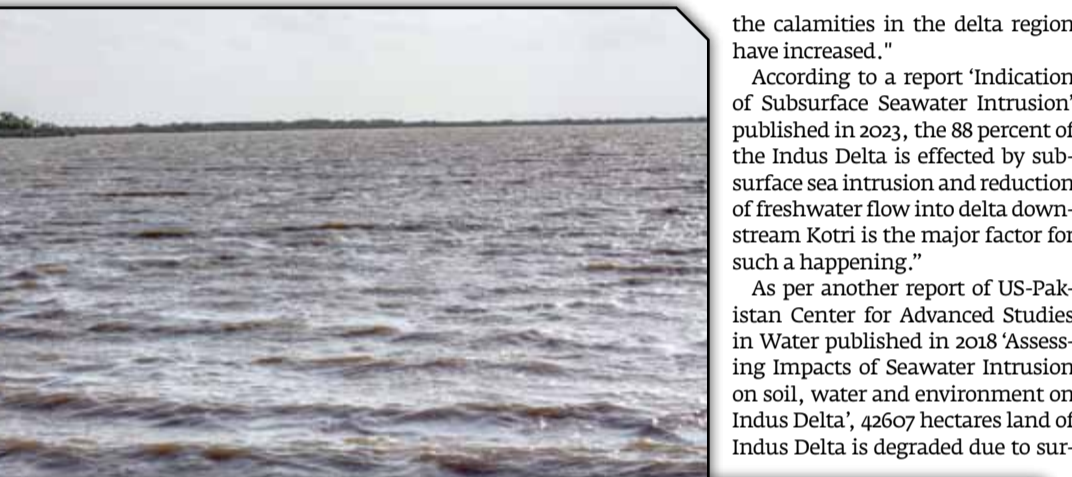
believes that the scarcity of freshwater in the delta downstream of Kotri is a major issue. However, that the non-availability of freshwater in local canals is a significant problem, which has contributed to the rapid increase in sea intrusion in this coastal region.

"The Pinyari Minor, a vital water distributary that supplies water to Sujawal, remains dry for most of the year," he also points out. "Even in July and August, when floodwaters are being released, it still lacks



water. This distributary further branches into four smaller sub-distributaries, with Sher Khana Minor being the primary source of irrigation for most coastal villages. However, despite having a total of 60 RDs (revenue divisions), water only reaches the initial 20 RDs, leaving the rest waterless for over two years."

Ameer Bux Jat laments the same issue and according to him, the fresh water has become a unique thing in entire Kharochhan tehsil and consequently people even use seawater for the cleansing of dead bodies. "Kanto, Ratoal and Khaarwah distributaries provide water to Shahbanadar while Maatki shakh provides water to Kharochhan area and unfortunately all are dry even in this monsoon period when all



the floodwater of upward is sent to downstream," he says.

Migration dilemma and sea intrusion

Regarding the losses due to sea intrusion, Noor Muhammad reveals that they are incalculable, and the figures recorded in government documents are only partially accurate. "According to the government record its 2.3 million acres of land that has been intruded by sea but on ground it's over 5 million acres. Over 25 freshwater lakes have been submerged including Ram-listed Jhabo Lake, more than 100 villages have vanished, and 4-5 families from every existing village have migrated. Four Dehs have been completely, and nine partially, eroded by the sea. Moreover, there have been immense losses in agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and other

sectors, which continue to occur. Yet, plans are still being made to build more dams and canals upstream?"

Ameer Bux Jat, President of the Coastal Community Development Organisation (CCDO), a local community organisation in Kharochhan Tehsil, shares alarming revelations. According to him, out of the total 32 Dehs in Tehsil Kharochhan, 18 Dehs have become no man's land which is more than 50 percent, as they are uninhabited and completely eroded by the sea. "The population of Tehsil Kharochhan has drastically decreased, from 26,666 in the 1998 census to only 15,000 in the 2023 census," he says. "People from over 200 villages have been forced to resettle in other areas due to the devastating effects of sea intrusion. As the flow of the mighty Indus River has decreased,

the calamities in the delta region have increased."

According to a report 'Indication of Subsurface Seawater Intrusion' published in 2023, the 88 percent of the Indus Delta is effected by subsurface sea intrusion and reduction of freshwater flow into delta downstream Kotri is the major factor for such a happening."

As per another report of US-Pakistan Center for Advanced Studies in Water published in 2018 'Assessing Impacts of Seawater Intrusion on soil, water and environment on Indus Delta', 42607 hectares land of Indus Delta is degraded due to sur-

devastating the delta. If the demand for water is legitimate, why is Punjab's actions not held to the same scrutiny?

"The federal government is presently pursuing five hydropower projects on the Indus River under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In a surprising move, WAPDA proposed a plan in August 2023 to irrigate 34 lakh acres of land in the Cholistan desert, out of a total of 60 lakh acres. Building on this proposal, the Punjab government sought permission from IRSA in June this year to irrigate 6 lakh acres in a pilot phase." Khushak contends that these projects would be the final blow to the livelihoods of communities living in the Indus Delta, ultimately sealing their fate

The IRSA Act and the role of Sindh's representative in IRSA, he explains, were initially established to ensure provinces complied with the Water Apportionment Act 1991. However, IRSA's role has become increasingly contentious as it has begun to interfere in other provincial water matters. Notably, IRSA has consistently failed to speak out when Sindh's rightful share of water is reduced. The Sindh representative is bound to follow their government's directives, which are often influenced by the federal government or Punjab's majority, resulting in a lack of resistance or opposition.

Mangroves to save delta

Growing mangrove forest cover from time to time along the coastline of Sindh is what the only solace Sindh government has been provided to the coastal districts of Sindh i.e. Karachi, Thatta and Sujawal. The Range Forest Officer Sujawal & Thatta, Muhammad Khan Jamali is hopeful that the mangrove forest revival project will reduce sea intrusion at some extent, "The Indus delta area lies on 15 lac acres while the government has so far covered 5.5 lac acres where shield of mangroves has been formed between Karachi and Sujawal districts and surprisingly its growth rate has increased 300 times in last two decades."

But Ameer Bux thinks that mangroves alone can't do much more or stop sea intrusion at a great extent but it should be the government's sincere efforts in making river Indus clear of all the obstructions. "How can the people sitting in AC offices know and understand the severity of sea intrusion?" he questions.

According to Mirbahar, despite some rehabilitation efforts and large scale mangrove restorations, the lack of consistent freshwater supply and proper Indus River and Delta Management Plan continues to threaten the delta's ecological and socioeconomic stability. "On the other hand in the absence of river flow, the extensive water mining to meet domestic needs of megacities like Karachi and its sister cities has exacerbated the situation."

Jat concludes, "Every research study recommends that downstream Kotri needs at least 5-10 million acre feet water to minimise the impacts of sea intrusion and the main point of 1991 Water Accord was also that 10 million acre feet of water shall flow downstream all the way to sea in order to avoid sea intrusion but practically below Kotri water flow is zero in most years as a result of which sea intrusion has reached alarming proportions."

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