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## War-hit Gazans depend on UNRWA for ‘sheer survival’

Occupied Palestinian Territories, UNRWA, said Friday that its staff are still providing aid to the people of Gaza and the West Bank including East Jerusalem who depend on them “for their sheer survival”, a day after the Israeli parliament ban on its activities entered into force.

The development came as more than 462,000 people are estimated to have crossed from south Gaza to the north since the opening of the Salah ad Din and Al Rashid roads on Monday.

The UN and humanitarian partners said they are assisting those on the move by providing water, high-energy biscuits and medical care along these two routes.

Once back in the north, UN aid workers have reported seeing Gazans using shovels to remove rubble and setting up makeshift shelters or tents where their homes used to be.

Any disruption to UNRWA's work will have “catastrophic consequences on the lives and futures of Palestine refugees”, insisted Juliette Touma, Director of Communications for the UN Relief and Works Agency, pointing to the agency’s massive reach into the communities where it has provided free healthcare and education for decades.

Last October, the Israeli parliament – the Knesset – passed two laws that called for ending UNRWA’s operations in its territory and prohibiting Israeli authorities from having any contact with the agency.

That developed followed Israeli accusations that UNRWA workers were involved in the 7 October attacks inside Israel. Nine staff were sacked after an internal UN investigation for possible involvement.

Under the Knesset ban, UNRWA was ordered to vacate all premises in occupied East Jerusalem and cease operations in them by 30 January.

“Our teams continue to serve, even though they themselves in Gaza as an example, they themselves are impacted, they themselves have been forced to flee their homes,” Ms. Touma explained.

“They continue to serve and we are committed as UNRWA to stay and deliver across the

Occupied Palestinian Territory. That includes the Gaza Strip, it includes the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.”

She noted that no official communication has been received from the Israeli authorities on how the Knesset ban will be implemented across the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

“In the absence of any durable solution, Palestine refugees will continue to depend on UNRWA for basic services including health and education; and in Gaza, in the aftermath of the devastation caused by the war, for their sheer survival,” Ms. Touma maintained.

She noted that UNRWA's health centres continued to receive patients in East Jerusalem in the West Bank on Thursday, while schools were expecting to reopen on Sunday after a scheduled break.

“Our teams...will continue to provide learning for children. We have around 50,000 boys and girls across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, who go to UNRWA's schools,” Ms. Touma said.

## Rising Fuel Costs Hit Pakistan Hard

Amjad Khan

Imagine you are heading out to get some petrol, right? You have got your usual budget in mind, but when you get to the pump, you see that the numbers are higher than last time. It is a familiar scene in Pakistan right now. Fuel prices have taken another jump, and it is becoming a real challenge for many people.

So, what exactly has gone up? Well, petrol, which is what most cars and motorbikes run on, has increased. It is now sitting at Rs. 257.13 per liter, a bit of an increase from before. But here is the really tough part, high-speed diesel, or HSD, has gone up even more. It is now a pretty steep Rs. 267.95 per liter. You see, diesel is crucial because it powers a lot of the vehicles that transport goods, as well as agricultural equipment. So, it is not just about cars, it affects the whole economy.

This is not something that is happened randomly. The government has a group called the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority, or OGRA, which is responsible for keeping an eye on these prices and making adjustments. They looked at the global market, saw prices going up, and then increased local rates to match. It is like they are reacting to the global marketplace.

Now, how does this impact all of us? It is not just about topping off your car. This price hike has far-reaching effects. Petrol is what we use to go to work, take kids to school, and handle daily tasks. When petrol gets more expensive, it means we are all spending more just to move around. It hits people right in their wallets. But that diesel increase? That is where it really gets concerning.

Diesel powers trucks, buses, and a lot of farm machinery. So, when its price goes up, it increases the cost of transporting goods. This means that the price of everything, from food to clothing, goes up too. It is like a chain

reaction, making the cost of living that much higher. This affects the middle class and low-income families the most, because they are already struggling to afford basic necessities.

Why is this happening, though? Well, it is mostly because of the global oil market. The world has a huge market for oil, and prices change constantly. Since we import most of our oil, if the price goes up internationally, it goes up for us too. Recently, the price of Brent crude, a type of oil, went up by about \$2 per barrel. It may not seem like much, but it adds up when you are buying massive amounts of it. Diesel prices went up because the global price of diesel increased by \$2.50 per barrel. And even petrol went up 50 cents per barrel internationally, which also impacts our prices here. On top of that, the fees we pay to import petrol have also gone up. Even though the value of our money has stayed somewhat stable, the international market has a big impact on the prices we pay for fuel.

And there is another piece of the puzzle, taxes. Even though the government has removed the general sales tax, or GST, on fuel, they still impose other taxes on these products. There is a petroleum levy (a kind of tax) of Rs. 60 per liter and about Rs. 16 per liter in customs duties. So, it is not just the global prices that are making fuel expensive, it is also these taxes. The government uses that money, but it also makes us pay more for every liter of fuel.

Pakistan's economy is heavily reliant on imported oil. We don't have enough of our own, which makes us vulnerable to global market shifts. If something happens there, it impacts us here. We have seen this happen many times, and it is causing a lot of issues.

When fuel prices go up, it does not just make it more expensive to drive, it affects industries and the prices of basic goods. This is a serious problem for our economy because people find it more difficult to pay for everything. It is especially hard for those who are already struggling

to support their families. These ongoing price increases will likely lead to higher inflation and more people finding it difficult to meet their financial burdens.

This is not a new issue either, it has been happening repeatedly. Just recently, in January 2025, there were two separate price increases. The first one was at the beginning of January, and then again a couple of weeks later. It is like being on a roller coaster, making it hard for people to plan and keep up with the fluctuating costs.

So what is the future looking like? Well, it is difficult to say. Pakistan is constantly dealing with the ups and downs of the global oil market. It is a challenge for the government to keep things balanced, and it is even more of a struggle for the common citizen, who has forced to pay more and more for everything.

The government needs to find a better approach to our energy situation, maybe find alternative ways to secure fuel or develop better policies to deal with these global price changes. Otherwise, we will just keep experiencing these same issues again and again.

As you can imagine, people are quite worried, and they have every right to be. Transporters are worried about the cost of their businesses, farmers are feeling the pressure since their machinery runs on diesel. Everyone is getting ready for another jump in prices for general goods. People are already noticing that their daily expenses are higher than before, and it is getting harder to make ends meet.

So, that is the situation. It is not just about filling up a car or bike, it is about the bigger picture. It is about the strain on everyone's finances, the challenge of keeping our economy going, and the struggles faced by the average person daily. It is a tough time, and everyone is hoping things will get more stable in the future.

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# A Fight to Protect Pakistan’s Children from Big Tobacco

According to the WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, tobacco use kills over 163,000 Pakistanis every year. Tobacco use—perpetuated by addiction to the nicotine found in cigarettes and other tobacco and nicotine products like heated tobacco products and e-cigarettes – has proven links to conditions like heart disease, lung disease and cancer.

The global statistics are far more alarming as WHO estimates suggest more than 8 million deaths each year due to tobacco consumption while 1.2 million of these are a result of second-hand smoke exposure. The data reflects that 24 million adults use tobacco products in Pakistan while 15.6 million smoke tobacco and 7.6 million use smokeless products. This is a very alarming situation which needs immediate interventions by the government to safeguard public health.

Around the world, efforts to reduce tobacco use are undermined by the aggressive opposition of the big tobacco industry, which puts profits over lives. The tobacco industry and its allies have a pattern of attacking and seeking to discredit organizations and advocates working to reduce tobacco use. Studies, including those from the WHO, have repeatedly debunked the industry claims, showing that effective tobacco

control policies reduce consumption without significantly increasing illicit trade. These claims have been disproven in country after country and it is also important to note that the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) – a global tobacco control treaty which Pakistan became a party to in 2005—obligates countries to protect their public health policies from the harmful influence of the tobacco industry.

Government of Pakistan has made significant progress towards adopting the policies relating to the effective control of tobacco use such as increased taxation, a ban on advertisement and larger graphical health warnings on cigarette packets. As outlined in the National Tobacco Control Strategy 2022-30, the government recognizes the important role of civil society groups, including both international and local organizations. Campaign for Tobacco free Kids through local civil society organizations, provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Health on policies and guidelines to ensure they are FCTC compliant along with being compliant with best health and safety practices. Strong support is offered for these

evidence-based efforts by the government to save lives from tobacco use through stronger policies, contributing to the betterment of public health worldwide, especially the health of kids.

CTFK is working in multiple countries to support efforts to reduce tobacco use and has been instrumental in supporting stronger tobacco control measures and supporting local civil society organizations in their efforts. In Pakistan, the group's support for local organizations has been significant in increasing awareness about the harms of tobacco use, promoting graphic health warnings and supporting restrictions on tobacco advertising.

Recently, the tobacco industry has launched a misinformation campaign against CTFK aiming to discredit their efforts in Pakistan. Such misinformation not only undermines the efforts on the ground by health advocates, compromising the integrity of evidence-based policies designed to reduce tobacco use, but also poses a direct threat to advancing public health. These recent misinformation campaigns are baseless and have no connection to reality, their sole aim is to tarnish the reputation of those

working toward public health goals. They inaccurately report on CTFK, falsely claiming that the government should cease their operations. In reality, CTFK operates with the permission of the government, following legal guidelines. They are committed to working in a transparent and lawful manner to support local civil society organizations and the government of Pakistan in advancing efforts to reduce tobacco use.

As a public health advocate dedicated to safeguarding Pakistan's children from tobacco use, I am deeply committed to exposing the recent spread of inaccurate media and social media content—part of a misinformation campaign that seeks to undermine efforts to reduce tobacco use. This is not the first time such tactics have been employed, as the tobacco industry has consistently resorted to similar strategies in the past to discredit efforts aimed at protecting public health. We stay committed to our mission, and the collective efforts of civil society organizations and public health advocates are crucial in this fight. Only through collaborative action can we ensure that Pakistan's children and future generations are not subjected to the deadly consequences of tobacco addiction.

*(The writer is a public health advocate and working as a Program Manager at Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC)*



Cartoon by Amjad Rasmī. (Courtesy of Ashraf Al-Awsat)

## Revolutionizing Higher Education in Pakistan: Bridging Global Trends with Local Needs

Dr. Muhammad Shahzad Ashfaq

Higher education plays a crucial role in the development of any nation by shaping the future workforce, fostering innovation, and driving economic growth. In Pakistan, there is growing need to revolutionize higher education to align it with global trends while catering to local needs. The challenges faced by the Pakistani education system, the importance of integrating global best practices, and the strategies to bridge the gap between global trends and local requirements in higher education.

Pakistan faces various challenges in its higher education sector, including outdated curricula, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to quality education, and an emphasis on rote learning rather than critical thinking. To address these challenges, it is essential to incorporate global trends in higher education that focus on skills development, innovation, and technology. Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, there is a need to shift from traditional teaching methods to more interactive and experiential learning approaches to meet the demands of the 21st-century workforce HEC, 2021.

The country faces unique socio-economic issues, regional disparities, and cultural norms that taken into account when designing educational policies and programs. For instance, there is a need to address the lack of gender equality in higher education and promote inclusivity and diversity on campuses. Tailoring education initiatives to local contexts and involving relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process, Pakistani universities can ensure that their programs are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

Despite strides made over the years, disparities persist in enrollment, retention, and graduation rates between male and female students. This inequity not only undermines the principle of equal opportunity but also limits the potential contributions of diverse perspectives to academic discourse and innovation. Institutions must recognize that achieving gender parity is essential for fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

To promote inclusivity and diversity on campuses, universities should implement targeted policies that address systemic barriers faced by underrepresented genders. These may include mentorship programs, scholarships and workshops that raise awareness about unconscious biases among faculty and administration. Furthermore, creating safe spaces for dialogue can empower marginalized voices while encouraging a culture of respect and understanding among students. Higher education is not merely a moral imperative; it is crucial for cultivating an academic landscape that reflects the richness of human experience. A commitment to inclusivity will enhance learning outcomes and prepare graduates to thrive in an increasingly diverse global society.

Revolutionizing higher education in Pakistan requires a careful balance between embracing global trends and catering to local needs. Integrating interdisciplinary studies, technology-enabled learning, research collaborations, and inclusive practices, Pakistani universities can enhance the quality of education, produce skilled graduates, and contribute to national development. It is imperative for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to work together to create a modern and dynamic higher education system that prepares students for success in a rapidly changing world.

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