



CGR DIGEST

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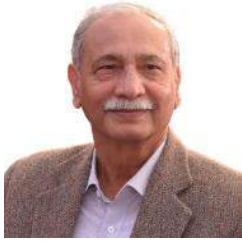
Islamabad Office:

#38-W, Khalid Plaza, 1st. Floor. Jinnah Ave. Blue Area. Islamabad Phones 051-2870852 & 2870853.

Lahore office:

22, Tipu Block, New Garden Town, Lahore
Phone: 042-35831352

Director's Note



April was yet again a productive month for the civil society to continue to contributing against the scourge of organised crime in Pakistan.

Crime Congress to be held in Abu Dhabi in April was postponed, now to be held in September.

CGR is all set to participate in the Constructive Dialogue on Firearms on May 13, 2026.

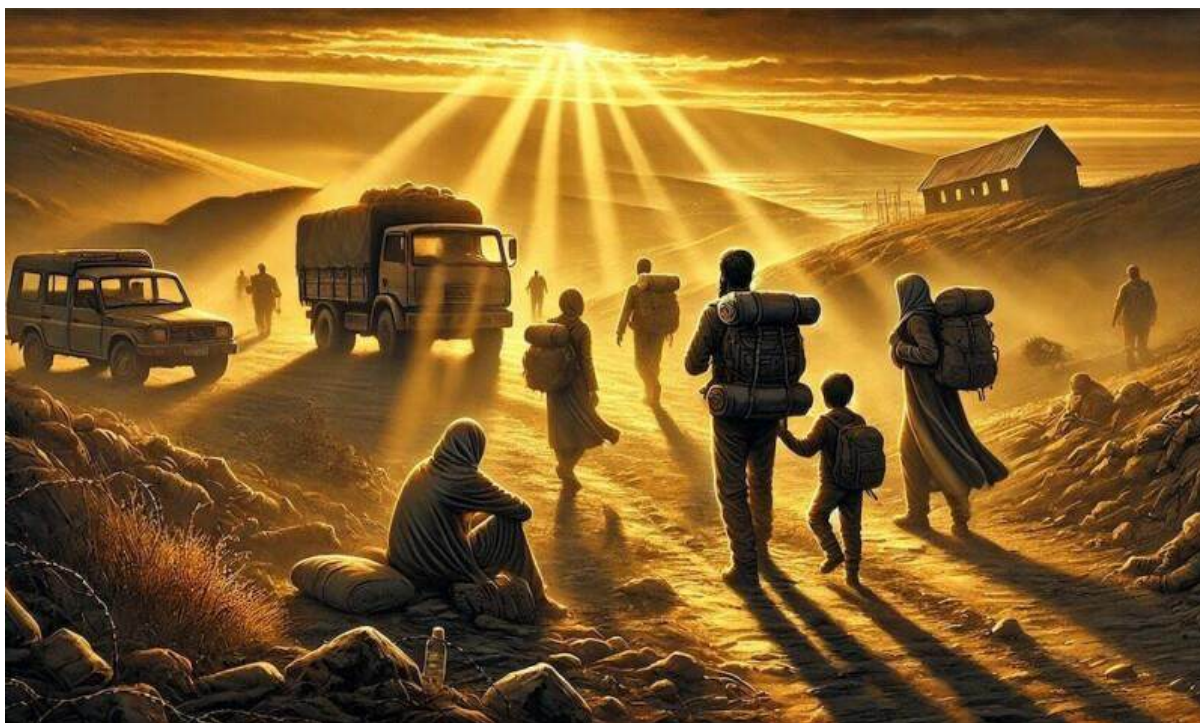
We are also looking forward to participating in person at the Crime Commission on Criminal Justice during the first week of June in Vienna.

UNTOC Conference of Parties in October 2026 will also be a big event for active participation by the Civil Society Alliance against Organised Crime.

Tariq Khosa

Director CGR

109 illegal migrants from Pakistan died or went missing last year: International Organisation for Migration



ISLAMABAD: A total of 109 Pakistanis were among at least 2,722 persons from the Asia-Pacific region who died or disappeared around the world last year in an attempt to cross illegally into other countries, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

This marked the second consecutive year with more than 2,700 deaths worldwide, highlighting the persistent risks faced by migrants and an urgent need to strengthen protection for people on the move, the IOM said in a statement.

The data was collected under the “IOM Missing Migrants Project 2026”.

IOM data shows Afghanistan, with 1,540 persons, accounted for the highest number of migrants who died or disappeared

According to statistics gathered by the IOM for Asia-Pacific, the highest number of nationals who died or disappeared during migration – 1,540 – were from Afghanistan, followed by 935 nationals from Myanmar. Pakistan, with 109 nationals was third, followed by Bangladesh with 80 individuals, and India with 15.

The nationalities of 43 other persons were not mentioned.

According to IOM, due to the clandestine nature of irregular movements and difficulties in tracing migration fatalities, the actual death toll along these routes is likely to be much higher.

Therefore, despite the large number of recorded deaths and disappearances, the Missing Migrants Project (MMP) data should be considered as the “minimum estimate of the true number of migrant deaths and disappearances” in the world.

In 2025, 91 per cent of these fatalities occurred within the region, with at least 2,471 people losing their lives or going missing within the Asia-Pacific region. A total of 1,547 persons hailed from South Asia, 920 from South-east Asia, and four from the Far East.

The highest number of recorded incidents occurred along land routes between Afghanistan and Iran, as well as on maritime routes across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

Beyond the Asia-Pacific region, at least 251 Asia-Pacific nationals died or disappeared along migration routes in other parts of the world, with the majority occurring on routes towards or within Europe. Gender and age disaggregation remains incomplete, with approximately 40 per cent of last year’s recorded fatalities lacking information on this count.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 1ST, 2026

The Problem with the Pak Cybercrime Watchdog

BY SADDIA MAZHAR



On the morning of January 23, 2026, human rights lawyer Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and her husband Hadi Ali Chattha were travelling to the Islamabad High Court in a vehicle provided by the Islamabad High Court Bar Association to attend a scheduled hearing when police intercepted their car in Islamabad and placed them under arrest.

The detention came despite the couple having secured temporary relief from arrest earlier from the high court in connection with a case related to their social media activity. Authorities invoked previously registered first information reports (FIRs) and took them into custody before they could reach the court.

Within a day, a sessions court sentenced the two lawyers to a combined 17 years in prison under multiple provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (Peca) linked to posts on the social media platform X. Court proceedings were conducted through video link, while the couple remained in custody, and the verdict was announced shortly afterward.

Reacting to the case, Imaan Mazari's mother and former federal minister Shireen Mazari tells Eos that the experience has raised serious concerns about how cybercrime laws are being enforced.

"It has certainly alerted me more to the dangers of abuse inherent in the present digital justice system, not only in the actual clauses of the law but also the proclivity to misinterpretation of the law itself," she says. "The whole exposé of the Blasphemy Business Group [BBG], which has been operating in connivance with some National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency officers, has revealed the abuse of this law most starkly."

In May 2024, the federal government created the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), replacing the Cybercrime Wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). The new agency was established under Section 51 of Peca, with nationwide jurisdiction to investigate digital offences. All ongoing cases and staff from the FIA's Cybercrime Wing were transferred to the new body.

The move was presented as a major structural reform aimed at modernising Pakistan's response to rapidly growing online crimes, including financial fraud, digital harassment, identity theft, child exploitation, hacking and cyber-enabled scams. Authorities had argued that a dedicated agency would improve investigative focus, enhance digital forensic capacity, speed up case processing and strengthen prosecution under cybercrime laws.

LOOKING AT THE NUMBERS

According to official data obtained through a right to information (RTI) request, the NCCIA received 94,552 complaints nationwide during the nine-month period (April-December 2025) under review in the research conducted for this article.

Of these, 21,260 complaints were converted into formal inquiries, meaning only 22.49 percent moved beyond the initial screening stage, while nearly 77.5 percent did not proceed to inquiry.

From the inquiries initiated, 1,440 FIRs were registered across the country. This represents 1.52 percent of total complaints and 6.77 percent of the inquiries conducted, indicating a significant filtering process between the initial complaint stage and the formal registration of criminal cases.

Further along the prosecution chain, 651 challans were submitted in courts. While this accounts for 45.2 percent of the FIRs registered, it amounts to only 0.69 percent of the total complaints received.

The final stage convictions present an even sharper drop. Only 20 convictions were secured nationwide during the period under review. This translates to 0.021 percent of total complaints, 1.39 percent of FIRs and 3.07 percent of challans submitted in courts. The steep decline at each stage from complaint to inquiry, inquiry to FIR, FIR to challan and ultimately conviction highlights the challenges involved in converting cybercrime complaints into successful prosecutions.

Provincial data also reveals stark disparities in reporting and enforcement. Punjab accounted for 63,831 complaints, representing 67.54 percent of the national total. Sindh followed with

18,067 complaints (19.11 percent), while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) recorded 10,520 complaints (11.13 percent) and Balochistan 2,134 complaints (2.26 percent).

Punjab also recorded the highest number of FIR registrations, with 1,125 FIRs, 78.1 percent of all FIRs registered nationwide. Sindh recorded 162 FIRs (11.25 percent), KP 121 (8.4 percent), and Balochistan 32 (2.22 percent).

In terms of convictions, Punjab secured 12 of the 20 convictions nationwide (60 percent). Sindh and KP recorded three convictions each, while Balochistan secured two. District-level figures show that complaints are heavily concentrated in major urban centres. Lahore reported the highest number with 19,854 complaints, followed by Karachi with 10,020 complaints. Rawalpindi recorded 9,068 complaints, while Faisalabad (5,571), Multan (4,910) and Gujranwala (4,706) also featured prominently.

In Sindh, Hyderabad recorded 2,091 complaints, while Sukkur, Karachi East and Karachi Central reported comparatively smaller numbers. In KP, Peshawar topped the list with 3,910 complaints, followed by Abbottabad, Mansehra, Mardan and Haripur. In Balochistan, Quetta accounted for 1,533 of the province’s 2,134 complaints, suggesting that cybercrime reporting remains largely concentrated in provincial capitals and major cities.

‘MUZZLING DISSENT’?

Stage	Number
Complaints Received by the NCCIA	94,552
Complaints Converted into Formal Inquiries	21,260
FIRs Registered After Formal Inquiries	1,440
Challans Submitted in Courts	651
Convictions Secured	20

Nationwide data from April-December 2025 showing the number of complaints that progressed to further stages along the NCCIA chain

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan
Complaints Received by the NCCIA	63,831	18,067	10,520	2,134
FIR Registrations	1,125	162	121	32
Convictions	12	3	3	2

Provincial data from April-December 2025 showing the number of complaints that were received by the NCCIA, how many led to FIR registrations and, ultimately, convictions

Pakistan’s cybercrime law, Peca, has long been controversial among digital rights advocates. Digital rights activist Farieha Aziz, who is a co-founder of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights, argues that, while cyber harassment and online fraud require effective law

enforcement, the law's broad framing and its enforcement mechanisms have raised serious concerns.

"A longstanding issue with Peca has been the excessive criminalisation of speech, for instance, criminal defamation [Section 20]," says Aziz. "Other countries follow a non-enforcement or decriminalisation pattern and defamation remains within the civil law ambit. Not here. Then take the addition of Section 26A, 'fake and false information', which has been arbitrarily used since it was introduced to muzzle dissent."

She adds that both the structure of the law and its enforcement raise broader concerns about rights protections.

"Both the framing of Peca and its application run contrary to our commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR] – both from a criminalisation standpoint and what is passed off in the name of regulation ie the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA] powers and, now, the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority [SMPRA]. Censorship is not regulation, which is what this is."

Journalist Nadir Baloch, who recently received a notice from the NCCIA, tells Eos, "From my experience, the process adopted by the NCCIA lacked transparency from the very beginning. I was never clearly informed about the nature of the allegations against me. The notices only mentioned a charge under the Defamation Act but provided no details, no explanation of the accusation and no copy of the complaint filed against me."

He continues: "Without knowing what I am being accused of, it is impossible to meaningfully prepare a defence or properly join an inquiry."

Baloch adds that investigators appeared primarily interested in securing access to his digital devices. "It became clear that my mobile phone and other devices were the main focus from the outset. Seizing digital devices without first clearly informing a person of the allegations raises serious concerns about due process and fairness. As a journalist, this approach makes me feel vulnerable and targeted. Transparency is a fundamental safeguard and, without it, the entire process appears opaque and deeply concerning."

Lawyer and rights activist Jibran Nasir is even more critical of the institution's performance. "The NCCIA, which is effectively a makeover of the FIA cybercrime wing, is perhaps the most incompetent, monetarily corrupt and morally bankrupt civilian law enforcement agency, and it should be shut down. I believe all protections under the Peca law are redundant if those enforcing it are compromised."

Following the arrest of activists and journalists, the NCCIA has also faced scrutiny over several high-profile investigations and internal controversies since its formation.

The arrest and sentencing of Imaan Mazari and Chattha also drew criticism from several international human rights organisations, which questioned the use of cybercrime provisions in cases involving online expression.

Shireen Mazari argues that recent developments suggest the law is increasingly being used to target dissenting voices. She says the amendments to cybercrime legislation appeared

designed for political targeting and alleges that investigators had deliberately misinterpreted the content of her daughter's tweets during the proceedings, raising broader concerns about how digital speech is being assessed and prosecuted.

Islamabad-based journalist Waheed Murad was forcibly taken from his residence in Sector G-8 in the early hours of March 26, 2025, at around 2-3am, when unidentified men, reportedly accompanied by police vehicles, entered his home without prior notice and removed him to an undisclosed location. Later the same day, he was produced before Judicial Magistrate Abbas Shah in Islamabad by the FIA, in a case registered under Peca linked to alleged "intimidating" social media activity, including a repost.

The FIA sought physical remand, and the court granted a two-day remand, after which he was released on bail, drawing concern among legal observers over the manner of the arrest and the agency's handling of the case, particularly the lack of transparency and the use of a pre-dawn operation.

"My abduction and subsequent arrest in a cybercrime case was not an isolated incident," Murad tells Eos. "Such efforts to suppress freedom of expression and press freedom have long been ongoing in Pakistan.

"As far as the establishment of a separate agency to tackle cybercrime is concerned, the core issue lies in the intent and application of the law. Regardless of how many agencies are created, the perpetrators do not regard the law, and their objective is not to combat fake news or misinformation but to silence critical voices. Therefore, such measures are unlikely to make any real difference. Meaningful improvement in the law is only possible when there is clear and sincere intent, and when the perspectives of all segments of society are incorporated – especially those who are most active on social media and those working in the field of digital rights."

QUESTIONABLE PRACTICES

Lawyer Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir (right) with her husband and fellow lawyer Hadi Ali Chattha during a court hearing in Islamabad on December 5, 2025: earlier this year, a sessions court sentenced the two lawyers to a combined 17 years in prison under multiple provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (Peca) linked to posts on the social media platform X

One of the most widely reported cases involved YouTuber Saad ur Rehman, popularly known as Ducky Bhai. Authorities initiated an investigation against him over allegations of promoting illegal online gambling applications through social media platforms.

The inquiry was conducted under provisions of Peca, along with sections of the Pakistan Penal Code related to fraud and unlawful online activity. The case, however, soon spiralled into controversy when allegations of bribery and misconduct surfaced against investigators handling the inquiry.

According to multiple media reports, several officials were accused of demanding money in exchange for favourable treatment during the investigation. Subsequent internal action led to

the arrest and suspension of a number of officers associated with the probe, while others resigned as the allegations came under scrutiny.



The controversy deepened as disciplinary proceedings were initiated within the agency. In the months that followed, several officials were dismissed or removed from service as part of internal accountability measures linked to corruption complaints and administrative irregularities.

Beyond individual complaints, the agency has also faced internal controversies and operational challenges since its formation. Many employees who had been hired on contractual terms during the transition from the cybercrime wing of the FIA to the newly established NCCIA saw their contracts expire without renewal. Reports indicate that more than 100 staff members were impacted.

The abrupt termination of these contracts created uncertainty within the organisation and raised concerns about workforce stability, particularly as the agency is responsible for dealing with thousands of cybercrime complaints every year.

The situation became more contentious after the government issued notifications appointing several officials from the armed forces to senior positions within the agency. The move sparked debate among legal observers and civil society groups about the structure, oversight and civilian nature of the cybercrime enforcement body.

Lawyers working on cybercrime cases say that, despite the institutional restructuring, the day-to-day functioning of investigations has remained largely unchanged. Advocate Shah Fahad, a lawyer who has handled cases before the FIA's cybercrime wing and now appears in matters before the NCCIA, says the transition has not resulted in significant procedural reforms.

He points out that, despite the transition to the NCCIA, there has been little to suggest any substantive shift in how cybercrime complaints are handled, especially when it comes to handling cases under Section 20 and 21 of Peca. According to him, the change from the FIA

appears largely superficial, with the same personnel and investigative approaches continuing, and no meaningful improvement in procedures, victim facilitation or overall standards.

He also emphasises that the process itself can become an added burden for complainants, particularly when they are required to hand over personal digital devices as part of the evidence. This raises further concerns around privacy and ease of access to justice, especially since there have previously been data leaks in sensitive cases being conducted by the FIA cybercrime wing.

Riazul Haq, a senior journalist based in Islamabad who has reported on cybercrime enforcement since the formation of the NCCIA, tells Eos that procedural gaps continue to persist within the system. He points out that the online complaint mechanism remains unreliable and often unresponsive, forcing complainants to visit offices in person to complete even basic requirements of their cases.

Haq further highlights that the department is facing a severe structural and operational crisis. According to him, the total workforce stands at around 400 personnel nationwide, out of which only a small fraction (approximately eight–10 officers) are permanent, while the overwhelming majority are working on short-term contracts, creating instability and weak accountability. He further points out that the government initially committed a budget of Rs 14 billion for the NCCIA, which was subsequently reduced to Rs 10 billion, then Rs 6 billion and eventually shrank to nearly Rs 1 billion, much of which has still not been effectively released, thus severely hampering capacity building.

Compounding the issue is the fact that the NCCIA lacks a centralised and reliable data management system, limiting its ability to track and respond to cybercrime efficiently. In terms of case data, Haq notes that around 56 percent of reported complaints fall under online fraud, harassment and related cyber offences, reflecting the growing scale of digital crime. He emphasises that, with limited offices, insufficient funding, lack of technological infrastructure and a largely contractual workforce, the institution is struggling to cope with an overwhelming volume of cases, further deepening its credibility and performance crisis.

Commenting on the institutional structure, he says the new body largely continues the practices of its predecessor, the FIA. “With 90 percent of the staff being contractual, it is difficult for employees to feel secure about their performance,” he says, describing the working environment as marked by “chaos, urgency and a hodgepodge approach”, while also noting that politicisation and external influence have weakened the agency’s autonomy.

The uncertainty over staffing has also reached the courts. Raja Abdul Qadeer, a barrister representing 41 officers of the NCCIA before the Islamabad High Court, says the petitioners serving in BPS-17 and BPS-18 pay scales, in roles such as investigation, digital forensics and legal analysis are seeking regularisation through the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) after their posts were converted from development to regular budget positions.

Qadeer tells Eos that the officers were originally recruited through a competitive process in 2018 under the cybercrime wing of the FIA and have served continuously since 2019. The petition argues that, once these posts were formally shifted to the non-development side in

2022, the government became legally bound to process their regularisation in line with existing court precedents. On the last hearing, the court also directed the authorities to release the employees' salaries.

STRUCTURAL GAPS

Official figures presented in parliament by interior minister Mohsin Naqvi illustrate the scale of cybercrime investigations being handled by the agency. According to the data, 98,206 inquiries were registered nationwide over the past five years. Of these, 53,717 were disposed of, while 51,696 remain pending, reflecting a substantial backlog.

During the same period, law-enforcement authorities registered 7,690 FIRs related to cybercrime. While 3,505 cases have been disposed of, 4,185 remain pending, highlighting the growing pressure on investigative and prosecutorial systems dealing with digital offences in Pakistan.

Sadaf Khan, co-founder of Media Matters for Democracy, tells Eos that the issue goes beyond individual cases and reflects deeper structural gaps in Pakistan's cybercrime system. Pakistan's cybercrime framework, she argues, requires reforms that focus on process, capacity and public trust, alongside the integration of a human rights and a gender lens in both law and investigative procedures.

"A significant portion of enforcement under Peca has focused on cases related to online speech," she says. "As a result, investigative resources often appear to be directed toward monitoring or responding to expression-related complaints rather than building specialised capacity to tackle complex financial cybercrime or other technically sophisticated offences."

Khan adds that simply creating a new institution without addressing deeper structural problems risks reproducing the same weaknesses within a different organisational structure. "When legitimate expression is constrained," she warns, "information vacuums emerge in spaces where misinformation, speculation and confusion begin to flourish."

Murad believes that improvement in the cybercrime law is only possible if intent is clear and transparent, and the views of all segments of society are included, especially those who are more active on social media and those working on digital rights. This view finds endorsement from Shireen Mazari, who argues that the law itself and its enforcement structure need fundamental reform.

She calls for "a total revision of the law, with clear guidelines on its use, plus a complete restructuring of the NCCIA," alleging that the current body has been marked by "abuse and corruption."

Citing cases such as those involving Imaan Mazari and Chattha, she claims that the conduct of officials raised serious questions during court proceedings and reflects a broader pattern visible in NCCIA cases and court verdicts which, in her view, points to systemic misuse rather than isolated incidents.

UNFULFILLED PROMISES

Multiple officers within the NCCIA were approached by Eos in order to obtain an official stance regarding these concerns. None of the individuals approached responded to Eos' repeated queries and no formal spokesperson has been designated by the department since its formation. Efforts to obtain a comment from Talal Chaudhry, who serves as Minister of State for the Interior, also went unanswered, reflecting continued institutional silence on the matter.

In the absence of structural reform, the promise that led to the creation of the NCCIA risks remaining unfulfilled. What was envisioned as an autonomous, specialised body to counter the exponential rise in cybercrime is instead grappling with limited expansion, persistent controversies and questions around transparency and accountability. Voices from across the spectrum, including journalists, legal experts and digital rights advocates, continue to highlight gaps in governance, enforcement and safeguard mechanisms.

Without clear oversight mechanisms, adequate funding, institutional independence and protections against the misuse of laws such as Peca, the NCCIA's trajectory may not only undermine public trust but also weaken Pakistan's broader response to an evolving and borderless cyber-threat landscape.

SOURCE: DAWN, EOS, APRIL 5TH, 2026

FIA to use AI-powered system to track down most wanted criminals



FIA DG DR USMAN ANWAR.

ISLAMABAD: The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has developed an artificial intelligence (AI) based system to track down criminals by visualising their appearance in real time.

Speaking to Dawn, FIA Director General (DG) Dr Usman Anwar said that the agency's red book, containing details of most wanted criminals, was being updated with features, employing AI-based tools to generate a set of fresh visuals of their appearance based on old photographs.

Even if the criminal has gone bald by now or sports a beard, the agency will now be able to track their identity. DG Anwar told Dawn that under the new system, it would be "impossible" for criminals to hide their identity by changing physical appearance.

The other features of the modern red book to be available online to all FIA officers concerned as well as the general public also include details about family members and known associates of the accused; CNIC, passport and cellular phone numbers; distinguishing marks, bank account details; information on first information reports (FIRS); and status of court cases against them.

Speaking to Dawn, the FIA chief said that the updated red book will also include the modus operandi and areas of operation of human smugglers, including the routes they use and their last known location.

A total of 143 human traffickers wanted in different cases registered in FIA's Anti-Human Trafficking circles are listed in the red book, he added.

He stressed that digital transformation was a key pillar of the FIA's reform and modernisation agenda.

Anwar said the use of modern technology not only helps suppress crimes but also enhances transparency, efficiency, supervision, and data-driven decision-making.

He asserted that initiatives were focused on replacing manual, fragmented processes with integrated digital systems, enabling real-time oversight, improving record integrity, and strengthening inter-agency connectivity.

"Through systematic digitisation of investigations, inspections, accountability, and human resources processes, FIA has moved toward institutionalising e-governance and modern law enforcement practices," he remarked.

The FIA DG said an internal accountability mechanism involving digitised processes, including fact-finding inquiries and departmental proceedings, was already in place and will be further strengthened.

Anwar also shared that the Centralised Immigration Monitoring and Control Centre at FIA headquarters was being upgraded and relocated as well.

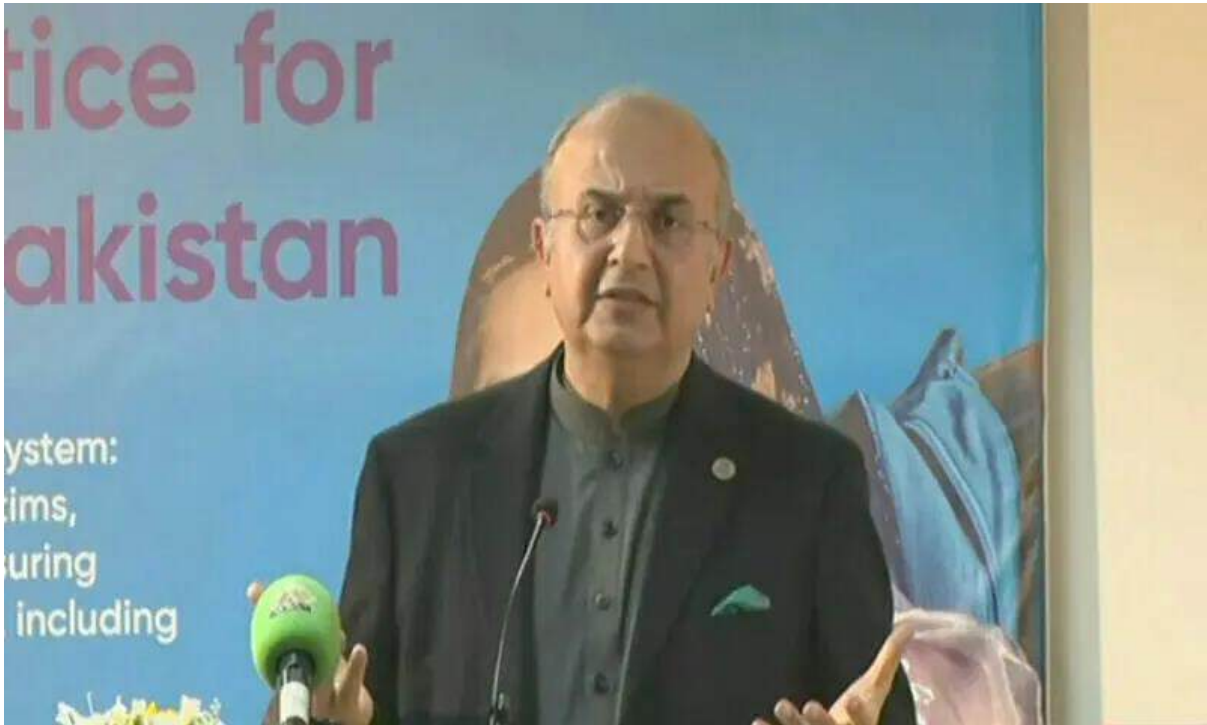
Responding to a question on capsizing incidents of migrant boats, he maintained that the FIA was taking strict measures to prevent such incidents.

In that regard, he stated that the legal framework had been strengthened and a crackdown against human smugglers continued. He added that FIA officials who were found negligent were reprimanded.

He also appealed to the youth desperate for jobs to seek legal pathways and avoid risking their lives.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 5, 2026

Future of Pakistan's justice system lies in ADR



Justice Mansoor Ali Shah speaking at the Federal Judicial Academy in Islamabad.

LAHORE: Supreme Court's former senior puisne judge Syed Mansoor Ali Shah said the future of Pakistan's justice system lies in Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR), urging lawyers to understand and adapt to their evolving role in this framework.

Addressing the second national conference on ADR, retired justice Shah noted that, unfortunately, arbitration remains difficult in Pakistan due to existing legal constraints.

He said that ADR does not undermine the judicial system, rather, disputes can be resolved more naturally through dialogue and negotiation.

"The biggest flaw in our justice system is delay."

He stated that by the time a case reaches the Supreme Court and a convict is acquitted, as many as 17 years may have passed.

He questioned why no one asks why the conviction was handed down in the first place.

"Who would account for the suffering endured by the convict and his/her family during those 17 years. This question has no answer," he remarked.

Citing international practices, he referred to China's approach, saying Chinese stakeholders prefer avoiding litigation as court cases often damage relationships, therefore, they opt for reconciliation instead.

He added that under China's founding leader Mao Zedong, millions of disputes were resolved through committees.

Justice Shah observed that legal education in Pakistan is largely based on adversarial approach rather than reconciliation-oriented.

He highlighted that in China, mediation is mandatory, while Islam also prioritises resolving disputes through compromise. He noted that the Prophet Muhammad (PBHU) resolved many conflicts through reconciliation.

He stressed that any mediation framework must ensure satisfaction of both parties and that a mediator must be a good listener.

He pointed out that countries such as Turkey, the United States, Italy and India had made mediation mandatory before going for traditional litigation.

Expressing concern, Justice Shah said that although laws related to ADR exist in Pakistan, their implementation remains weak.

The country must eventually move towards a culture of reconciliation, he added.

After the event, Justice Shah had an informal conversation with the reporters.

Asked about the effect of the 26th and 27th constitutional amendments on the life of a common man, he said the amendments drastically changed the structure of the justice system. He said the role in the appointment of judges had been shifted to the executive.

He also questioned the establishment of the Federal Constitutional Court, what he claimed, without a clear parameter for the appointment of its judges.

"The greatest strength of a court lies in public trust. Without it, a court becomes ineffective," he asserted.

To a query about possibility of 28th amendment, Justice Shah said he had no knowledge of any such move.

Justice Shah along with Justice Athar Minallah had resigned from the Supreme Court after the passage of the 27th constitutional amendment in November 2025.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 5TH, 2026

Bannu bombing

ALTHOUGH Operation Ghazab lil-Haq has led to a decline in the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, the threat has not been entirely eliminated, as the recent suicide bombing targeting Domel police station in KP's Bannu shows.

At least five people were martyred all civilians reportedly belonging to the same family. Meanwhile, a planned suicide bombing targeting a police station was foiled by law enforcers in Lakki Marwat's Bittani area. Police personnel raided a forested area and captured the terrorists suspected of planning the attack.

This part of KP is particularly plagued by terrorism, and its proximity to Afghanistan makes it vulnerable to attacks by groups such as the banned TTP.

To bring peace to these long-disturbed areas, the state must concentrate on two fronts: externally, by confronting the terrorist threat from Afghanistan, and internally, by improving intelligence capabilities and busting terrorist networks before they strike. The action in Lakki Marwat shows that when LEAs have good intelligence, they can save lives.

Regarding Afghanistan-based terrorists, Kabul and Islamabad are continuing talks in the city of Urumqi facilitated by China. The engagement is the first major effort to resolve the dispute diplomatically after hostilities broke out between the two states in February. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said that talks are "advancing steadily".

However, for a fruitful outcome, the Afghan Taliban must take verifiable action, as Pakistan's Foreign Office has said, to prove that they are no longer providing sanctuary to terrorist groups such as the TTP. Without such guarantees, the negotiations are likely to stall as have earlier efforts and the exchange of fire between both countries will continue. China is aware of the threat Afghanistan-based terrorist groups pose to neighbouring states its concerns about ETIM highlight this fact hence it can impress upon Kabul to address Pakistan's legitimate concerns.

Internally, through better intelligence and counterterrorism actions, Pakistan must secure areas in KP and Balochistan where terrorists operate with relative freedom. The seemingly endless cycle of moving forces into disturbed areas, conducting operations, clearing the areas, and then witnessing the resurgence of terrorist activity must end. Far too many security personnel and civilians have been martyred in these actions, while local populations have faced upheaval and relocation. Securing the border is essential, but internal vigilance is equally important. The elements facilitating the terrorists, for example, through the provision of arms, funds and other support, must be identified and prosecuted.

Long-term peace in KP and the rest of the country is contingent on kinetic actions, as well as a solid CT policy that identifies and tackles threats before they become difficult to manage.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 5TH, 2026

Visa fraud, human trafficking: Immigration firm owner gets 60-year rigorous imprisonment



LAHORE: The owner of a prominent immigration consultancy was sentenced to a total 60-year jail term, along with a fine after being convicted in four cases of human smuggling and visa fraud. The sentence in each case will run concurrently.

The special court, Central-II, Lahore, after completing proceedings in four cases, convicted the accused, Zulqarnain Asad, who is the owner of the Global Citizenship Solutions (GCS), which offered services for immigration and jobs in European countries, Canada and Australia.

In the first case (177/2023), the court sentenced the accused to 15-year rigorous imprisonment (RI), along with a fine of Rs1.7 million.

In the second case (269/2023), the accused was awarded 15-year RI and a fine of Rs1m.

Similarly, in the third case (240/2023) Asad was handed down 15-year RI and a Rs1m fine, while in the fourth case (244/2023), the court awarded 15-year RI, along with a Rs1.2m fine.

“These sentences were made possible owing to the strong investigation conducted by the FIA and the effective prosecution by its legal team. The court accepted the evidence presented by

FIA and announced the verdict accordingly,” an official of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) told Dawn.

FIA Director General Dr Usman Anwar appreciated Lahore Director retired Capt Muhammad Ali Zia and the investigation team for presenting strong evidence against the accused, saying that such convictions serve as a deterrent against this heinous crime.

The FIA Lahore, in February 2023, had arrested Asad following a good number of people from Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Faisalabad and Multan filed complaints of fraud of millions of rupees against him, on the pretext of immigration.

Initial investigation revealed that the GCS has extorted millions of rupees from a number of people aspiring for Canadian immigration, jobs in Australia and citizenship of European countries through investment.

Sensing it was a mega immigration/visa consultancy fraud in the country, the FIA high command had constituted a five-member Joint Investigation Team (JIT) to probe the matter.

One of the complainants, Dawn spoke to, said that he contacted the GCS Lahore for immigration to Canada and initially paid over Rs1.1 million for its services.

“The GCS team told me that it followed the legitimate immigration process that was entirely transparent and according to IRCC Canada. Instead, it sent me fake screenshots of the portal, and nominations from British Columbia Canada, ITA & AOR. Despite numerous visits to GCS and meetings with their associates to verify the above-mentioned (bogus) documents, they always denied verification,” he said.

“This fraud has shattered me psychologically. I am having depression and also under a large debt,” says the victim, who is a qualified professional and did IELTS for this purpose.

Interestingly, at least two top female models, an actor/host and a former Test cricketer have endorsed the services of the GCS as ‘the best’ on its online page. The GCS had offices in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad.

There has been no word from the FIA about compensating the victims of GCS fraud after selling its properties.

This case turned out to be like that of Future Concerns Ltd (a known visa consultancy firm), whose owners – Asim Malik and his wife – have been absconding in the United Kingdom since 2013. The couple allegedly made billions through fraud.

The firm had defrauded a large number of Pakistanis on the pretext of securing immigration and visas for the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and some European countries for them.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 8TH, 2026

'20 Pakistanis' among missing after boat capsizes off Italy



This photo taken on April 4, 2026 and handout on April 5, 2026 by German NGO Sea-Watch, shows migrants seated on a capsized boat off Libya.

- **Families say victims hailed from Gujrat, Gujranwala regions; one survives**
- **Over 80 migrants went missing after boat carrying 120 people sank in Mediterranean**

GUJRAT: After a boat carrying more than 100 migrants capsized off the coast of Italy, at least 20 Pakistani nationals, hailing from Gujranwala and Gujrat regions, were said to be among dozens of victims who were lost at sea.

According to the UN's International Organisation for Migration, more than 80 migrants had gone missing when their boat capsized in the Central Mediterranean after departing from Tajoura Libya, with around 120 people onboard. 32 people were rescued and two bodies were found.

Local sources said that at least 20 of the missing Pakistanis had been from Gujranwala, Mandi Bahauddin, Hafizabad and Sialkot districts. At least six victims were from the Phalia tehsil of Mandi Bahauddin. About 11 people hailed from the Pindi Bhattian and Hafizabad tehsils of

Hafizabad district, and one each from Gujranwala's Noshehran Virkan and Sambrial tehsil of Sialkot. One Pakistani national, Imran Asghar, was among the survivors.

The Federal Investigation Agency, however, declined to confirm the reports about missing Pakistani nationals. An FIA official told Dawn that they had been investigating these reports and collecting information from the respective districts.

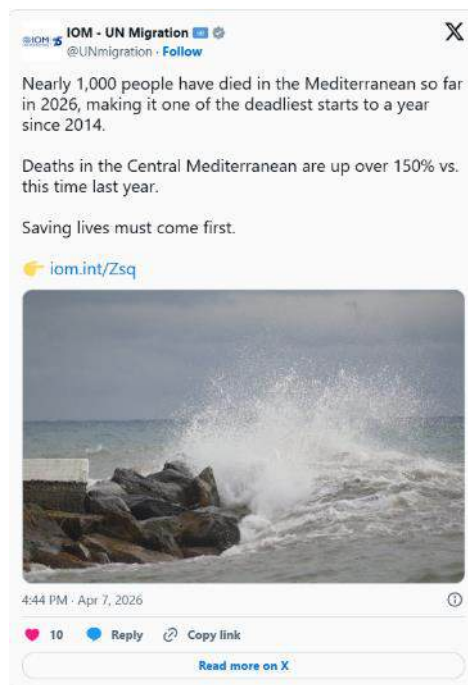
He said the foreign and interior ministries had not shared any information with them regarding the number and the identities of Pakistanis, feared dead in the incident. This is the first major incident involving the Pakistani immigrants since January 2025 when at least 40 citizens drowned on their way to Spain.

The International Organisation for Migration said the vessel took on water in rough weather before overturning, according to AFP. 32 survivors were rescued by a merchant vessel and a tugboat and later brought to Lampedusa by the Italian coast guard, it said, adding that two bodies had been recovered.

Survivors said that the boat had left Zuara in Libya overnight between March 28 and 29.

"After three days at sea, the vessel was left adrift due to engine failure, fuel shortages and lack of food as weather conditions deteriorated," IOM said, adding that initial testimonies indicated "many victims died before rescue operations, possibly due to hypothermia".

According to the IOM, more than 180 people are feared dead or missing in Mediterranean shipwrecks over the past 10 days, the United Nations said Tuesday, with nearly 1,000 deaths counted since the start of 2026.



So far this year, around 765 people had died in the Central Mediterranean – over 460 more than during the same period in 2025, it added.

And “across the Mediterranean as a whole, at least 990 deaths have been recorded in 2026”, IOM said, adding that it was “one of the deadliest starts to a year since 2014”, when it began collecting this data.

The agency said that just since March 28, at least 181 people had died or gone missing in five separate shipwrecks.

In an earlier shipwreck on April 1, at least 19 migrants were found dead aboard a vessel off Lampedusa, IOM said, adding that 58 people, including women and children, had been rescued, with several in critical condition.

Also on April 1, at least 19 other migrants died in the Aegean Sea near Bodrum, Turkiye, after a rubber boat capsized en route to Greece, the agency said, adding that “several” people had been rescued in that case.

IOM also listed a shipwreck on March 30, near Sfax, Tunisia that left 19 dead and around 20 missing, and another on March 28, in which at least 22 people died off Crete after departing eastern Libya.

“These tragedies show, once again, that far too many people are still risking their lives on dangerous routes,” IOM chief Amy Pope said in the statement. “Saving lives must come first. But we also need stronger, unified efforts to stop traffickers and smugglers from exploiting vulnerable people, and to expand safe and regular pathways - so no one is ever forced into these deadly journeys.”

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 8TH, 2026

Fighting radicalism

MOHAMMAD ALI BABAKHEL

SINCE 9/11, Pakistan's response to terrorism, which has intensified due to suicide attacks, lone-wolf acts and technology misuse, has been mainly kinetic, with hard and soft approaches like security operations and peace pacts. The need to defeat militant ideology is overlooked.

Legal and institutional responses to CT are mainly reactive and punitive. Rehabilitation, reintegration and deradicalisation are low priorities. An effective response to violent extremism needs a diagnostic approach; a solely security-based one shuts out human rights. Collective resolve, political ownership and support and volunteerism in communities where extremism breeds are needed. Is countering VE through rehabilitation only the state's responsibility or a shared domain? In fact, CVE needs collaboration with communities, LGs and NGOs. Wars on terror require a broader view of the reasons behind VE. To prevent VE, civil society is key, as the UK, which collaborated with 82 CSOs in over 40 areas, realised.

In Pakistan, at first there was little awareness of peace education's importance. A few universities began peace and conflict studies degree programmes but schools, where curricula are based on narratives of hatred and intolerance, neglected it. Articles 140-A and 25-A may help deradicalisation. But the challenge is to make it feasible; Unicef says 25.1 million children here are out of school. To prevent VE and reduce violent narratives, a long-term plan is needed to enrol them. This needs political resolve and consensus in federating units.

After the Malakand operation, many terrorists/extremists were arrested; hundreds were selected for deradicalisation and rehabilitation, including economic empowerment through skills training. The programme's aim was to deradicalise and rehabilitate by unlearning and seeking help from extremists' families. An issue is weak post-programme monitoring. A 'no blood on their hands' policy filters participants, including militants who haven't killed or caused severe injuries. There are four phases: selection, deradicalisation, reintegration and monitoring through psychologists, religious scholars, vocational teachers and social workers.

Hurdles are political, social, institutional and ideological. Without a unified national deradicalisation policy, results in the centre and provinces are uneven, leading to ad hoc donor-funded programmes and unclear roles. Trouble spots are scattered, and programmes are small-scale with fewer resources – thus unsustainable.

Online radicalisation fuels fake news and extremist narratives. Civil society is ill-equipped to effectively counter it. Social media has a role in radicalisation and deradicalisation. The latter needs the engagement of youth influencers and civil society, localised counter-narratives, improved digital literacy and AI-based monitoring and content removal. Socioeconomic inequalities breed radicalisation and hinder deradicalisation. Efforts at the latter by women or donors may be met with distrust in conservative societies. Societies with strict norms usually don't support reintegration, enhancing the risk of relapse into extremism. They may

reject former militants because of the stigma linked to VE. Government-administered projects and NGOs may lack expertise in psychology, ideology and rehabilitation, and may not understand local extremism drivers.

While supporting deradicalisation and rehabilitation, parents face social, psychological and structural hurdles. Many of them in militancy-hit areas can't understand early radicalisation signs or respond to extremist views. Their rejection or ignorance can strengthen extremism.

Radicalised individuals' families may face isolation due to community pressure and stigma, making reintegration difficult. Externally designed programmes have weak community ownership – often due to ethnic and sectarian diversity – and poor grassroots participation. They focus on radicalisation from a religious ideological context, overlooking poverty, identity crises, lack of justice and political grievances as local drivers. Many programmes rely on imported content, with NGOs seen as foreign subsidiaries. Hence the focus must be on local needs and narratives.

Extremists threaten political and social workers and NGOs. In the merged districts and Balochistan, polio workers, NGO staff, maliks and politicians are targeted, limiting outreach. In developing societies, especially those facing internal conflict, civil society can't freely engage in CVE. By promoting dialogue, challenging violent narratives and creating opportunities for marginalised groups, civil society acts as a preventive and rehabilitative force. Collaboration between institutions and civil society builds resilient communities and ensures peace.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 14TH, 2026

SBP replaces 2018 crypto ban with new VASP rules



State Bank of Pakistan

KARACHI: The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has issued a circular enabling regulated entities to open and maintain bank accounts for Pakistan Virtual Asset Regulatory Authority (PVARA)-licensed virtual asset service providers (VASPs) and their customers, subject to strict compliance and anti-money laundering (AML) requirements, according to a circular issued by the central bank and a statement by the virtual asset regulator.

The move follows the enactment of the Virtual Assets Act, 2026, and replaces the central bank's 2018 circular that prohibited dealing in virtual currencies. This marks a transition from a previously restrictive environment to a structured, regulated framework.

Prior to onboarding a VASP or initiating any activity with it, banks shall obtain and retain a copy of the VASP's valid licence issued by PVARA and independently verify its authenticity from PVARA. Banks shall open separate transactional accounts, known as client money accounts (CMAs), for settlement of authorised transactions of licensed VASPs based on the VASP's business model. Strict segregation between CMAs and other types of accounts of VASPs shall be ensured, and commingling of VASP funds with those of their clients shall be strictly prohibited. CMAs shall be PKR-denominated, non-remunerative accounts for executing authorised transactions. Cash deposits and withdrawals shall not be permitted in

CMAs, and funds maintained in CMAs shall not be used as collateral or security to provide any form of financing or credit facilities to VASPs.

Banks shall conduct complete due diligence of VASPs to understand the nature and scope of their business, specific activities conducted, customer onboarding process, customer base and geographic markets. Banks shall also make appropriate amendments to their customer risk profiling model to account for risks posed by VASPs and report any suspicious transactions to the Financial Monitoring Unit.

Banks may also open limited-purpose accounts for entities holding NOCs issued by PVARA, enabling them to complete formalities for obtaining a licence. Only upon the grant of a licence by PVARA can the bank extend additional services, including virtual asset-related transactional activity.

SOURCE: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, APRIL 16, 2026

Pakistan, Italy to combat cultural heritage smuggling



A visitor takes photographs on his mobile of seized ancient statues at a museum in Karachi.

- **Dedicated liaison channel to be set up between FIA and Italy's Carabinieri TPC unit**
- **Pakistani officials to receive training in Rome**

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and Italy are set to roll out a structured bilateral cooperation mechanism to counter the smuggling of stolen cultural heritage, as cases of antiquities trafficking from Pakistan to European markets continue to rise.

The proposed framework includes intelligence sharing, specialised training, capacity building, and the transfer of modern technology to strengthen institutional responses against transnational crimes targeting cultural property.

Officials say it will function as a dedicated liaison channel between the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Italy's elite art-crime police.

FIA Director General Dr Usman Anwar attended a high-level Zoom briefing on Thursday delivered by Brigadier General Antonio Petti, Commander of the Carabinieri for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (TPC), Italy's 300-strong unit widely regarded as the world's leading cultural police force.

"International cooperation is the only way to dismantle these networks. Cultural crime is transnational, and you cannot fight it alone," Brig Gen Petti was quoted as saying during the briefing.

The virtual briefing follows commitments made during Interior Minister Mohsin Raza Naqvi and FIA DG Dr Usman Anwar's visit to Rome in February. During that visit, the two sides agreed to establish a formal mechanism, with facilitation from the Pakistan embassy in Rome, to curb the smuggling of cultural artifacts.

"This partnership gives FIA access to the best forensic tools, databases, and operational tactics in the world," Dr Usman Anwar told Dawn after the briefing.

The briefing session comes after a sharp uptick in thefts from archaeological sites in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. In 2025 alone, the FIA reported seizures of smuggled Gandharan and Buddhist artifacts worth over \$3.2 million.

In February, the agency busted a major ring in Taxila attempting to move 2nd-century statues to Europe via Dubai.

During Thursday's session, Brig Gen Petti shared best practices used by the Carabinieri TPC, which has recovered more than three million stolen artifacts since 1969.

The Italian unit maintains "Leonardo", the world's largest database of stolen art, which FIA officers will now be trained to access in real time.

Under the upcoming framework, Pakistan and Italy will establish a dedicated FIA-Carabinieri liaison desk in Rome. The first cohort of FIA officers is scheduled to begin joint training at the Carabinieri's academy in Rome in the third quarter of 2026 (July-Sept period).

A formal MoU to codify the cooperation is expected to be signed in Islamabad next month. The Zoom interaction marks a significant step toward sustained coordination, joint initiatives, and knowledge exchange between the FIA and the Italian Carabinieri, as both countries move to protect cultural heritage from transnational criminal networks.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 17TH, 2026

Amnesty highlights erosion of civil liberties in Pakistan



The Amnesty International Hong Kong office

- **Says cybercrime, anti-terror laws are weaponised to silence voices; authorities pull ads from critical newspapers**
- **Warns world faces unprecedented rights crisis; cites use of AI, tech to expand surveillance, curb online dissent**

LONDON: Global rights watchdog Amnesty International released its annual report, delivering a stark warning that the world is confronting its “most challenging moment” as fundamental human rights are under a direct and escalating assault globally.

Amnesty’s Secretary General Agnès Callamard said the report, *The State of the World’s Human Rights 2026*, marks a moment that is fundamentally different, reflecting not a gradual erosion but a deep global crisis.

“What marks this moment as fundamentally different is that we’re no longer documenting erosion around the system’s edges,” Callamard said. “This is a direct assault on the foundations of human rights and the international rules-based order by the most powerful actors for the purpose of control, impunity and profit.”

The report, spanning over 400 pages with findings on 144 countries, featured Pakistan prominently, detailing a sustained pattern of restrictions on civil liberties, including curbs on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and political participation.

Pakistan's rights report card

Amnesty noted changes to online speech and anti-terrorism laws in Pakistan significantly impacted freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, leading to the detention of journalists, activists and opposition members.

On legislative changes, the report pointed to the 27th Amendment, which it said "significantly undermined the independence of the higher judiciary and provided broad immunity to the heads of the armed forces and the president".

Authorities continued to use detention as well as cybercrime and anti-terror laws to suppress freedom of expression. The report cited censorship of online content, including arbitrary shutdowns by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), and noted that Pakistan updated its web monitoring system with technology from China. It also mentioned that authorities selectively withdrew advertising from newspapers as retaliation for critical reporting.

Enforced disappearances remained a significant concern. Protests by Baloch activists in Balochistan and Sindh were curtailed, and during a protest by the Baloch Yakjethi Committee on March 21 calling for the release of forcibly disappeared activists, three protesters were killed by law enforcement.

Regarding the crackdown on the opposition PTI, the report stated that over 100 PTI leaders and activists were convicted by anti-terrorism courts in cases related to the May 9, 2023 protests.

Those convicted included opposition leaders Omer Ayub and Shibli Faraz, MNA Zartaj Gul, and activist Khadija Shah.

PTI founder Imran Khan remained in jail on "politically motivated charges," the report said, citing that he had been kept in solitary confinement and denied access to legal counsel.

Violence against women continued unabated. The report cited the organisation Sahil as recording a 25 per cent rise in reported cases over an 11-month period.

Journalists and human rights defenders were frequently targeted under the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (Peca). The report named journalists Asad Toor and Sohrab Barkat as being barred from leaving the country, with Barkat later charged under Peca.

It said human rights defenders, like Imaan Mazari and Hadi Ali Chatta, were criminally charged for social media posts, raising due process concerns. Tensions with India led to more arrests over online expression. The report also noted the targeting of activists from marginalised communities.

Global trends

Beyond Pakistan, the report painted a grim picture of the global landscape, noting the spiraling conflict in the Middle East as a “product of this descent into lawlessness”.

In the Middle East, Amnesty reiterated its findings that Israel committed war crimes and crimes against humanity against Palestinians in Gaza.

In India, the report highlighted the use of national security laws to detain activists and suppress dissent, noting a shrinking space for civil society and the targeting of minority communities.

Amnesty’s analysis underscored a convergence of crises, including armed conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan and Myanmar marked by widespread violations of international law. It also noted the intensification of authoritarian practices in traditionally democratic countries, with crackdowns on protests reported in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The report also highlights systemic discrimination, noting that refugees, migrants and racialised communities have borne the brunt of restrictive policies. Gender-based violence have increased, while economic inequalities and climate-related disasters have further exacerbated vulnerabilities.

According to Amnesty, technology enables repression through increased surveillance and online censorship and unchecked AI growth may solidify current abuses.

Despite the bleak assessment, the report pointed to pockets of resistance through civil society movements and legal challenges.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 21ST, 2026

7,900 people died, disappeared on migration routes in 2025: UN



Migrants disembark from Open Arms rescue boat after arriving at Messina port, Sicily, Italy on Aug 27, 2022.

Around 7,900 people died or disappeared on migration routes in 2025, taking the total dead and missing since 2014 beyond 80,000, the United Nations' migration agency said.

The UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said people were being forced into dangerous, irregular journeys when safe pathways were out of reach, and urged countries to find the political will to save more lives on migration routes.

"The deaths or disappearance of nearly 7,900 people were documented on global migration routes worldwide in 2025," the IOM said.

The IOM's Missing Migrants Project "has documented more than 80,000 deaths and disappearances during migration since 2014", the agency said.

"While these figures represent only the lowest boundary of the true number of affected people, they nonetheless underscore the need for urgent action to end migrant deaths and address the complex needs of families left behind," said the IOM.

The IOM said the 7,904 deaths and disappearances documented in 2025 "mark a continuation and escalation of a global failure to end these preventable deaths".

“2025 was marked by an unprecedented level of aid cuts and restriction of information on dangerous irregular routes, rendering more and more missing migrants invisible,” it said.

Meanwhile, “an even more hidden population” of at least around 340,000 family members were estimated to be directly affected by the “ongoing crisis of missing migrants”.

They are having to deal with the psychological, social, legal and economic impacts of having a relative whose disappearance remains unresolved, the agency said.

The IOM said the May 2026 International Migration Review Forum was a chance to change the dynamics.

“Sustained political will is needed to save lives on migration routes worldwide and make visible the families most impacted by these preventable losses,” the agency said.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 21, 2026

At UN panel organised by Pakistan, experts warn of terror groups exploiting AI, crypto



PAKISTAN'S permanent representative Asim Iftikhar Ahmad speaks at a UNSC briefing.

UNITED NATIONS: Terrorist groups are increasingly exploiting artificial intelligence, encrypted platforms and digital currencies, transforming the global threat into a more decentralized and harder-to-detect phenomenon.

These trends were discussed at a panel organised by the Permanent Mission of Pakistan in collaboration with the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) at the UN headquarters in New York, where diplomats, security experts and academics examined emerging patterns in global terrorism.



According to the panelists, the shift has expanded the reach of extremist networks beyond traditional conflict zones, enabling remote recruitment, propaganda and financing through online ecosystems that operate across borders and often outside regulatory control.

The convergence of these tools with rising ideological extremism – including far-right movements in Western societies – has further complicated efforts to define and counter terrorism, as loosely organised groups operate without clear leadership or geographic limits.

Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, said the threat landscape was “fast evolving,” pointing to “xenophobia, racism and religious intolerance, as well as gaps in the global counter-terrorism architecture and sanctions regimes.”

He also highlighted challenges faced by governments in regulating social media platforms and ensuring accountability of technology companies operating across jurisdictions.

Acting Under-Secretary-General of UNOCT Alexander Zouev said terrorism had become “multipolar and sophisticated,” stressing the need for preventive action to address risks linked to artificial intelligence, encrypted services and digital assets.



Other speakers, including China’s Permanent Representative Fu Cong, UN sanctions monitoring coordinator Colin Smith and human rights expert Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, highlighted the growing misuse of information technologies, including social media, artificial intelligence tools and virtual assets, for propaganda, recruitment and financing.

Experts noted that while traditional financing methods remain dominant, terrorist groups are increasingly experimenting with cryptocurrencies and digital wallets. The use of encrypted messaging platforms and online networks for disinformation and coordination has also made detection more difficult.

Participants also drew attention to persistent threats from militant groups operating in Afghanistan and beyond, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and its Majeed Brigade, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIL-K).

In Africa, groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) were identified as key actors driving instability in the Sahel region.

The discussion also highlighted the growing use of ungoverned spaces and fragile states as operational bases, combined with digital tools that allow global coordination without centralized command structures.

The urgency of regulating online spaces has increased since incidents such as the Christchurch mosque shootings, which demonstrated how attacks can be amplified worldwide in real time.

The meeting comes as the UN General Assembly reviews its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, with member states under pressure to adapt policies to an increasingly complex and technology-driven threat environment.

Pakistan, currently serving on the UN Security Council for 2025–26, has identified counter-terrorism as a key priority and is advocating a comprehensive approach that combines security measures with efforts to address root causes of conflict and instability.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 25, 2026

Migration toll

THE world should not be deceived by a global migration count lower than the highest annual statistics on record – 9,200 for 2024. Some 7,904 people disappeared or perished on migration routes worldwide in 2025 says the UN’s International Organisation for Migration. With these numbers, the missing or dead tally since 2014 surpasses 80,000 as per the agency’s Missing Migrants Project. The harsh realities in their countries remain troublingly persistent, forcing the uneducated and indigent to choose irregular journeys as safer travel alternatives are out of their reach. The migration agency states that the casualties and disappearances “mark a continuation and escalation of a global failure to end these preventable deaths”. It is a question of political will by affluent countries, largely responsible for the bleak circumstance in poor regions, to rescue more lives, introduce emergency measures that end deaths, and resolve the many problems plaguing families left behind.

This issue and concerns for victims cannot fade with the headlines. Extraordinary aid cuts and curbs on information related to illegal routes have led to surging numbers of migrants lost at sea. Last year, sea routes to Europe saw 3,400 deaths and disappearances; Bangladeshi nationals formed the largest group while policy changes in Syria succeeded in lowering arrivals. In Pakistan, the culture of impunity has created miserable conditions for the poor: 68pc of Pakistani migrants said that the lack of education, employment and basic amenities forced them out. The US State Department’s trafficking report in 2024 revealed an absence of accountability, for the fifth consecutive year, against corrupt officials. Transnational undertakings of this scale can hardly happen without the FIA’s knowledge. Other than alleviating factors that drive illegal migration, the state must ensure complicit officers are held to account, and that migrants – victims not criminals – are treated humanely. Most importantly, it must admit, and address, its own failure to protect and provide for citizens.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 27TH, 2026

Unlocking the crypto ecosystem

MUTAHER KHAN



For much of the past year, Pakistan’s crypto journey has been in full throttle and no short of main character energy. A council followed by an ordinance, which eventually gave way to an Act, along with the creation of a new regulator for virtual assets, with two exchanges — Binance and HTX — even getting the no-objection certificates.

Monumental as these measures were, the biggest story was perhaps on the political front, partly if not fully. A lot of ‘analysis’ has been churned on that, telling us that Pakistan’s newfound love for crypto was a trick to get cosy with Washington, specifically the Trump family, which reaped dividends in the form of Islamabad Talks. While there may be a degree of truth there, it serves little purpose to pontificate on such matters.

Throughout this push, the more interesting question was the execution and regulatory structure, especially with regard to payments. After all, ever since the State Bank of Pakistan’s (SBP) famous 2018 circular that barred regulated financial institutions from deal in virtual currencies, crypto essentially operated and thrived in the grey market.

And the SBP was taking its sweet time deliberating on stuff, whether the on- and off-ramp technicalities or its implications on capital controls, aka Foreign Exchange Regulation, which supersedes the Virtual Assets Act. While the latter is too difficult a terrain to navigate here, it finally moved the needle on crypto’s access to banks.

The SBP's Banking Policy & Regulations Department (BPRD) Circular, at last, replaced the prohibition put in place in 2018 and issued high-level protocols. A virtual firm seeking banking access must first obtain a Pakistan Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority (PVARA) no-objection certificate, after which it can proceed with anti-money laundering registration, local incorporation, and a limited-purpose account for completing the remaining formalities.

Full transactional banking only begins after PVARA issues a complete licence and the bank independently verifies that status. Needless to say, the bank must conduct enhanced due diligence and recalibrate its customer risk model.

Before getting into the nitty gritty, it is worth recalling why banking access mattered so much in the first place. Until recently, buying or selling crypto meant looking for peer-to-peer (P2P) merchants on exchanges, which created friction in the process and, occasionally, even led to raids by law enforcement agencies. This also meant that the regulatory bodies had no proper audit trail to determine the extent of virtual asset adoption in Pakistan, pushing everyone to rely on the hackneyed Chainalysis adoption index.

The structural centrepiece of the circular is the client money account, or CMA a segregated, rupee-denominated account that holds customer funds ring-fenced from the virtual asset service provider's (VASP) own capital. It earns no interest, cannot be pledged as collateral, and sits outside the scope of ordinary cash handling.

Let's suppose you are looking to buy crypto – you open your VASP app, find the asset you want, and the first thing you encounter is a choice of trading pair. If the platform offers a direct crypto/rupee pair, you pay more in spreads, and your options for smaller altcoins may be limited.

The more popular stablecoin route – converting your rupees into USDT or USDC first can get you better pricing and deeper liquidity, but adds a step. Once you confirm the order, you will need to make the payment, which can be made against the exchange's IBAN number, quite like how things work with brokerages. Now, depending on whether product integrations shape out or not, this can be through a fund transfer or a direct debit from your account.

When the money lands with VASP, it can reconcile the amount against your unique identifier the CNIC number, registered IBAN or something else – and execute the purchase. The crypto shows up in your wallet. So while the payment rails will remain the same as before, the bank and exchange have better visibility now as your rupees sit in a ring-fenced account.

The sell flow works similarly. When a customer sells a virtual asset, the VASP records rupee proceeds on its internal ledger. The customer may leave those proceeds sitting inside the app wallet – and frequently will. Only when they choose to withdraw does the CMA-based banking workflow activate, with the VASP instructing its partner bank to remit funds to the customer's personal account.

Trade execution remains inside the supervised intermediary; fiat entry and exit become visible at the banking layer. For regulators, that separation provides a cleaner audit trail than anything the grey market ever could.

It would be interesting to see what the change means for P2P merchants, who for long have operated as currency exchanges. Licensed VASPs can pre-fund liquidity pools on their own through institutional contracts, thus denting the grey market. Nevertheless, there are potential openings for regulated intermediaries: liquidity providers, broker-style firms, and existing money changers, depending on how PVARA defines its licence categories in practice.

As of today, those details are still few. PVARA itself is barely eight months old and in the process of building the regulatory infrastructure and capacity. For its part, the SBP hasn't yet publicly specified the rules for customer due diligence or anti-money laundering either. But let's not get ahead of ourselves, for years of inaction can't be changed within days.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 27TH, 2026

Police ‘encounters’

THE killing of nine suspects by Punjab’s Crime Control Department across Lahore, Sahiwal and Toba Tek Singh follows a disturbingly familiar script. Armed suspects allegedly open fire; police return fire; suspects are found dead; accomplices escape into the darkness. The narrative is consistent across multiple, dispersed operations and raises questions about the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. These deaths come just months after a damning HRCP report accused the CCD of pursuing a “deliberate policy of staged police encounters leading to extrajudicial killings”. The statistics are staggering: at least 670 CCD-led encounters over eight months in 2025, resulting in 924 deaths of suspects. The recent incidents underscore the issues the HRCP documented. In Lahore alone, six suspects died in separate operations, with police offering accounts of armed resistance. In Sahiwal, two men who had already escaped custody were intercepted and killed within hours. In Toba Tek Singh, an alleged drug dealer was shot dead at a checkpoint after purportedly opening ‘indiscriminate fire’. The pattern points to a culture of impunity in which lethal force has become the default response to crime. Such extrajudicial violence does not make citizens safer. It erodes the rule of law and public trust in institutions meant to protect them. When suspects are killed before they can face trial, justice is not served but circumvented.

The Punjab government cannot afford to treat these killings and the HRCP’s findings as mere criticism to be dismissed. An inquiry into all CCD-related deaths is imperative. Every encounter must be subjected to transparent review and the personnel involved must be required to justify the use of lethal force in each instance. Those found culpable of unlawful killings must face prosecution. The Punjab government should decide whether the CCD will operate as a law enforcement body or a death squad. The answer will define its commitment to justice itself.

SOURCE: DAWN, APRIL 30TH, 2026

Pakistan sees decline in militant violence for 2nd straight month: PICSS



A Pakistan Frontier Corps machine gunner stands guard in a pillbox in Balochistan.

Pakistan recorded a second consecutive month of improving security indicators in April 2026, with militant attacks and related casualties declining markedly, according to a report released by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS).

The Islamabad-based think tank documented 85 verified militant attacks in April, down from 146 in March, a 42 per cent decrease. As per the data, fatalities resulting from militant attacks fell from 106 in March to 60 in April, continuing a downward trend that began the previous month, when overall combat-related deaths dropped by 35pc.

The report said that the improvement follows Pakistan's cross-border military campaign targeting militant groups and Taliban positions between February 26 and March 18, which concluded with a suspension and subsequent talks in Urumqi, China.

Pakistan had launched Operation Ghazab lil-Haq on the night of February 26, following unprovoked firing by the Afghan Taliban from across the border.

According to the PICSS report, total combat-related deaths – including those from militant attacks and security forces operations – stood at 291 in April. Militants accounted for 224 of these deaths, representing 77pc of the total. The remaining casualties included 28 security forces personnel, 37 civilians, and two members of pro-government peace committees.

It said that the losses among security forces personnel also declined significantly, falling from 59 in March to 28 in April, which was a 53pc reduction. It said that civilian fatalities remained relatively stable, with 37 deaths recorded in April compared to 39 in March.

The data also showed a notable decline in injuries. Overall injuries dropped from 210 in March to 131 in April, a 38pc decrease. Civilian injuries fell from 98 to 54, while militant injuries declined from 57 to 31. Injuries among security forces personnel decreased slightly from 48 to 46, and no injuries were reported among pro-government peace committee members in April.

The report said that 85 militant attacks recorded during the month were largely low-intensity incidents, with a few exceptions. These included two suicide attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu district and a high-profile assault on a mining facility operated in Balochistan's Chagai district. The report noted that despite the drop in attacks, operations conducted by security forces remained robust. It said that 224 militants were killed in April, compared to 228 in March. In total, security forces killed 988 militants during the first four months of 2026, the report said.

Regionally, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa continued to record the highest number of militant attacks, followed by Balochistan. The PICSS report said that in mainland KP, attacks declined slightly from 51 in March to 45 in April, while fatalities remained unchanged at 34.

It said that the most significant improvement was observed in KP's tribal districts, where militant attacks dropped by 40pc, from 35 in March to 21 in April. Deaths from these attacks fell sharply to six, an 82pc decline.

At the same time, security forces intensified operations in the region, killing 120 militants up from 24 in March accounting for more than half of all militant fatalities nationwide in April, the report said. According to the data, Balochistan also experienced a notable improvement, with militant attacks falling from 59 in March to 18 in April, a 69pc reduction.

These attacks resulted in 17 deaths, including 10 linked to the attack on the mining facility in Chagai. Security forces killed 66 militants in the province during April, although this figure was lower than the 145 militants killed in March, the data showed.

Elsewhere, an isolated attack in Gilgit-Baltistan's Chilas district resulted in the deaths of three police personnel. The PICSS report said that no militant attacks were reported in Punjab, Sindh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, or Islamabad during the month of April. However, intelligence-based operations conducted by security forces in these regions led to the arrest of eight suspects – five in Sindh, two in Punjab and one in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Cumulatively, during the first four months of 2026, the PICSS recorded 401 militant attacks across Pakistan. These attacks resulted in the deaths of 190 civilians, 158 security forces personnel, and seven members of pro-government peace committees, it said.

Injuries during the same period included 469 civilians, 167 security personnel, and seven peace committee members. Meanwhile, security forces killed 988 militants and arrested 121 suspects nationwide, it stated.

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