

Weekly POK News Digest

(A weekly news digest on Pakistan Occupied Kashmir)

Volume 6 | Issue 4

26 January - 01 February 2026

POK
Relief Efforts
Gilgit-Baltistan
National Economic Council
Joint Awami Action Committee
Health Card Scheme
Digital Access
Tourism



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

No. 1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi-110 010

Contents

Political Developments

- Federal funding for provincial health schemes ruled out
- After the Earthquake, Chipursan Waits in the Cold
- Gilgit-Baltistan continues to suffer as roads remain inaccessible
- A Region Left Behind: Gilgit-Baltistan's Struggle for Digital Access
- Muqam vows implementation of JAAC agreement in 'Azad Kashmir'
- The Time for Change Is Now
- Only registered parties to contest 'AJK' polls, EC tells political groups
- Veteran Kashmiri leader Barrister Sultan Mehmood passes away at 73

Economic Developments

- 'AJK' cabinet approves health card scheme, Danish School Haveli plan
- UK-based charity to expand orphan sponsorship programme in 'AJK'
- GB winter adventure tourism hit by soaring permit fee, visa delays

Vernacular Urdu Media

- Kashmir issue is central point to our struggle: Faisal Mumtaz Rathore
- Muzaffarabad's development-related projects remain unfinished due to lack of funds: Khawaja Farooq Ahmed
- India opposes any third party mediation on Kashmir Issue: Masood Khan

Political Developments

Federal funding for provincial health schemes ruled out

Dawn, 26 January 2026

The federal government has decided it will not extend funding for provincial health coverage in any form, including insurance, in strict compliance with the 18th Constitutional Amendment and asked the provinces to consider providing full-fledged health insurance on a contributory basis.

The decision comes in the wake of recent engagements and approvals for extending the Prime Minister's Sehat Sahulat Programme (SSP), valued at about Rs40 billion, to three federally administered territories: the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), launched earlier this month.

Against this backdrop, internal proposals to include the population of Sindh's impoverished Tharparkar district under the SSP were not supported. It was argued during meetings of the Central Development Working Party (CDWP) and the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (EcneC), on the recommendation of a special committee constituted by the prime minister, that the inclusion of a single district would open the door for similar demands from other provinces, even though health is a devolved subject, documents seen by Dawn show.

At a high-level meeting chaired by the prime minister on Jan 2, the continuation of the programme beyond June 30, 2025, was approved until June 30, 2027 "for 'AJK', GB and ICT only", according to a Prime Minister's Office directive dated Jan 9, 2026.

Subsequently, the modified programme with a revised capital cost of Rs40.2bn was approved by the EcneC "in light of the prime minister's directive for the continuity of the programme beyond 30-06-2025 till 30-06-2027 for all permanent resident families of 'AJK', GB and ICT under universal health coverage (UHC) scope".

Under an earlier decision of EcneC of Aug 7, 2025, a special committee led by the planning minister to review the entire SSP since its inception in 2015 and way forward noted that the health programme had completed its life on June 30, 2025, after availing multiple revisions and time extensions. "Therefore, the programme should be shifted to the current budget," the committee said.

It also directed the Ministry of National Health Services to submit a Project Completion (PC-IV) report and propose a thin structure to sustain activities and provide indoor healthcare services and protection from catastrophic health expenditures for vulnerable populations. The committee said this limited scope was in line with the programme's original intent at the time of its launch. The committee said

that “provinces, ‘AJK’ and GB should continue their own social health protection schemes for the vulnerable populations”.

The committee opposed the inclusion of “provincial districts via SSP” due to the fact that health was a devolved subject, and “if we start in one province, then there will be demand from other provinces too. Therefore, the provinces should implement their social health protection programmes for the vulnerable populations through their own budgets”.

It also cited the reduced Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), which it said was already overstretched and unable to meet even the most critical federal liabilities. The committee, however, recommended that after conversion of the completed project to the recurrent budget, the health ministry should, with provinces, design a pilot project on an affordable basis through “claim co-payments” on the pattern of Punjab, and a roadmap towards a full-fledged Social Health Insurance (SHI) on a contributory basis should be looked into.

The original SSP was approved on Feb 7, 2018, under the Prime Minister’s National Health Programme Phase-II at a cost of Rs34bn. It aimed to cover the entire population living below the poverty line, based on a 32.5 Poverty Means Test (PMT) score or an income threshold of \$2 per day, using the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) database, with provinces contributing the secondary-care premium for their beneficiary families.

The national project expanded in subsequent revisions and extensions. In August 2019, all provinces except Balochistan were excluded from contributing to the priority-care treatment premium, with the federal government citing the spirit of the 18th Amendment under which both the health mandate and budgets were devolved to provinces. The programme ended on June 30, 2025.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1969086/federal-funding-for-provincial-health-schemes-ruled-out>

After the Earthquake, Chipursan Waits in the Cold

Pamir Times, 27 January 2026

When the 5.8 magnitude earthquake struck Chipursan Valley, high in Pakistan’s Gilgit-Baltistan region, it was not only houses that collapsed. In a matter of seconds, an entire community was pushed into uncertainty and displacement in the middle of winter.

Chipursan is home to around 4,000 people. Today, nearly 90 percent of the population is displaced, living in tents scattered across the valley. Around 600 houses have been damaged, at least 300 of them beyond repair.

After the earthquake, continuous aftershocks have made it impossible for residents to return home, forcing a full evacuation of many villages. Five people were injured, including two children who are now being treated at the hospital in Gilgit. One fatality was reported in neighboring Ishkoman.

Beyond Chipursan, the full extent of damage remains unclear, as assessments in surrounding areas are still ongoing.

GIS Specialist, Muhammad Anjum, points to deeper geological causes. Chipursan lies along a fault line near the boundary of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates. Residents report hearing underground rumbling and blast-like sounds for several months prior to the earthquake, suggesting the fault may have become active after a long dormant period. This was reported, but no actions had been taken. “While the earthquake itself was moderate in magnitude, its impact here was severe due to weak infrastructure, limited engineering, and the valley’s isolation. Continued tremors indicate that the area remains unstable, and further aftershocks remain possible”, says Muhammad Anjum. The epicenter is believed to lie somewhere near the Yeshkuk area, close to Zoodkhun.

For families here, the loss goes far beyond physical structures. Alam Jan, a resident of Chipursan, stands near his collapsed home, now uninhabitable. “If we see war, we feel sadness,” he says quietly. “But this is something else. This is life, this is nature.” Rebuilding, he explains, will take years. “A house here is not just walls and a roof. It carries our culture. The whole community contributes to building it.” Now living in a tent, Allam Jan worries not only about survival, but about what prolonged displacement might do to people’s minds.

“Staying in tents for months can break us mentally,” he says. “Some people may turn deeply inward, maybe toward religion, just to cope.” Despite the hardship, leaving is not an option for him. “This is my community. If I leave, who will stay strong for them?” His wife, Haj Bibi, looks at the rubble that once was their home. “We spent our entire lives building this house,” she says. “Everything we had is buried there.”

Winter has turned the disaster into a race against time. Temperatures drop sharply at night, and many fear illness spreading through the camps. Ahmed Jami, chairman of the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board in Chipursan, says the community was unprepared for a disaster of this scale. “This is the first time we are facing something like this,” he explains.

“The cold makes people vulnerable, especially children and women. Ideally, we would move them to lower valleys where conditions are less harsh.” But relocation is complicated. “Many families depend on livestock. Leaving means abandoning their only source of livelihood.” Permanent shelters are currently not an option, he adds, as weather conditions and terrain make construction nearly impossible.

For children, the fear has been overwhelming. A young boy from Zoodkhun, one of the hardest-hit villages, recalls the moment the earthquake struck. “I heard the mountains crashing,” he says. “I was ice skating and ran back as fast as I

could. When I reached home, a big pillar had fallen inside the house.” Now sleeping in a tent, he shivers constantly. “It’s so cold. I’m scared all the time that the earthquake will happen again. If we stay here, I feel like we will die”.

Medical teams visiting the area are increasingly concerned about psychological trauma. A doctor from Passu, says the impact is especially visible among children. “What we are seeing is a very high level of mental distress,” the doctor explains. “Children are anxious, and unable to sleep.” To address this, the team has brought a psychologist along. “Our goal is not only to treat physical issues, but to help calm people, to give them a sense of safety, even if only for a short time.”

Relief has begun to arrive, though it remains limited compared to the scale of displacement. The Aga Khan Agency for Habitat has distributed around 400 tents, along with food and blankets, while the Gilgit-Baltistan government has provided 100 additional tents. Food remains a pressing need, as much of it was buried under the rubble of collapsed houses. In the absence of a sustainable government solution, many families currently depend on support from neighbouring communities and local volunteers.

As aftershocks continue to ripple through the mountains, Chipursan remains in limbo: a valley waiting for stability, warmth, and the long process

of rebuilding not just homes, but a way of life shaped over generations.

<https://pamirtimes.net/2026/01/26/after-the-earthquake-chipursan-waits-in-the-cold/>

Gilgit-Baltistan continues to suffer as roads remain inaccessible

Dawn, 29 January 2026

The difficulties of Gilgit-Baltistan residents intensified on Wednesday as snowfall disconnected road access to remote areas, with temperatures dropping below minus 15 degrees Celsius in the region. As freezing temperatures persisted, people took to the streets to protest prolonged power outages. A patient in Astore allegedly died due to the unavailability of transportation facilities for treatment.

A fresh spell of snowfall on Monday and Tuesday brought life to a standstill across parts of GB amid freezing temperatures, power outages and road closures. The suffering of residents due to snow, harsh weather, lack of electricity and other basic facilities continued in remote areas on Wednesday.

Police said up to six inches of snow was recorded in parts of Skardu, Astore, Ghanche, Shigar, Kharmang, Hunza, Nagar and Ghizer, disrupting routine life and making travel hazardous. Locals said a patient from the Mirmalik area of Astore was being shifted on foot to Rattu hospital after roads were blocked by snowfall, but he died before reaching the hospital.

According to a statement issued by the Astore assistant commissioner, locals attempted to shift a patient from Chamriot to a nearby hospital. Following the information, a rescue team comprising the Astore Disaster Management District assistant director, two doctors and a snow-cutter machine was dispatched. The team reached Dadujil after clearing the road, but doctors confirmed that the patient had died four to five hours earlier.

Officials of the GB Communications and Works Department said the Karakoram Highway, Ghizer-Shandur road, Astore Valley road and Baltistan road were opened for traffic in the evening. Travellers were advised to exercise caution as snowfall had made roads slippery and hazardous.

Confined to homes

Residents in remote areas remained confined to their homes due to blocked roads, freezing temperatures and unavailability of electricity and firewood. Shafqat Hussain, a resident of Astore, said there was fear of food shortages in snow-hit areas if roads were not opened urgently. Upper areas of Skardu, Ghanche, Ghizer, Hunza, Nagar and Shigar were also facing communication disruptions, road closures and electricity shortages.

Residents were facing water shortage as pipelines and streams froze, forcing people, particularly women, to fetch water from distant places. In the border area of Dansar Thang in Kharmang district, heavy snowfall created a severe drinking water crisis. Locals said women were forced to fetch water

from dangerous mountain routes four kilometres away. They demanded emergency provision of clean drinking water and basic health facilities.

Residents in the Nilt area of Nagar district staged a protest by blocking the Karakoram Highway for several hours. Protesters said the area had been without electricity for several days. They added that residents already faced daily power outages of up to 20 hours, but electricity had been completely unavailable for the last few days.

Similar demonstrations were held in Gilgit's Basin area, as well as in Ghanche, Ghizer and Diamer.

The Provincial Emergency Operation Centre, GB, issued an alert warning of widespread rain, thunderstorms and snowfall from Jan 30 to Feb 2. It cautioned about extremely cold temperatures, avalanche risks, landslides, road closures and hazardous travel conditions, advising residents to remain alert and travellers to avoid non-essential travel during heavy snowfall.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1969626/gilgit-baltistan-continues-to-suffer-as-roads-remain-inaccessible>

"A Region Left Behind: Gilgit-Baltistan's Struggle for Digital Access"

Pamir Times, 30 January 2026

The little-known public sector organisation and Gilgit-Baltistan's largest mobile and internet service provider namely the infamous Special

Communication Organisation (SCO) has consistently failed to deliver. Yet it continues to insist on retaining control while celebrating incremental progress and remains reluctant to acknowledge the bitter truth that providing reliable telecom and internet facilities on modern standards requires far more than merely installing antennas and towers. That, such feat can only be achieved by Multinational Corporations (MNCs) that have access to vast financial resources, modern infrastructure and innovation. Having said that, their failure is not entirely intentional, nor it can be discredited outright considering the efforts it has made over the years to facilitate connectivity in the region. Gilgit-Baltistan's complex dynamics, difficult terrain, and harsh climatic conditions pose serious challenges to infrastructure development. However, recognition of these constraints should not obscure the broader picture.

While the rest of the country has made significant progress in the recent years in terms of quality telecommunication and internet services and infrastructure – with the government preparing to auction additional spectrum for the anticipated launch of 5th Generation technology- the region of Gilgit-Baltistan has witnessed little to no meaningful advancement. This stagnation has further widened the already existing digital divide between Gilgit-Baltistan and the rest of Pakistan.

The improved and comparatively reliable telecom and internet services in other provinces are largely a result of

healthy market competition between telecom operators run by MNCs, along with upgradation of optical fiber network primarily led by PTCL. In sub-urban and rural areas, improvements in telecommunication and broadband services have been enabled mainly through government-led interventions under the Universal Service Fund (USF), which has proven instrumental in advancing the vision of a Digital Pakistan.

Unfortunately, Gilgit-Baltistan remains excluded from the USF due to its so-called constitutional status. Moreover, PTCL's vast optical fiber infrastructure currently terminates at Kohistan and Chitral in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, leaving Gilgit-Baltistan under the near-monopoly of the resource-constrained and inefficient Special Communication Organisation (SCO). The organisation primarily relies on hardware and infrastructure contracts with companies such as Huawei and ZTE, limiting its flexibility and scalability.

Although SCO's primary mandate is to provide telecommunication services to military installations along the borders, it has, in recent years, expanded into the commercial sector with ambitions to launch services nationwide. Despite its limited resources and capacity, SCO has introduced fiber-based internet and 4G services in parts of Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. However, the reliability and efficiency of these services remain far below modern standards- for the record, you cannot even stream a 240p video without

buffering on its 4G network and have to wait till late night for everyone to sleep.

SCO maintains the only optical fiber link connecting Gilgit-Baltistan with Islamabad. This critical link is frequently damaged due to landslides and harsh weather conditions, forcing the entire network to rely on low-capacity microwave backup systems. The lack of redundancy often results in prolonged outages or severely degraded services, significantly hampering efforts toward digitalization and inclusiveness. Furthermore, many telecom towers in Gilgit-Baltistan continue to rely on microwave radio links, easily identifiable by drum-shaped antennas, which are highly susceptible to weather disruptions and offer far lower bandwidth than direct fiber connections.

Although SCO has recently introduced high-speed internet through optical fiber, its availability remains limited to a few kilometers within commercial urban areas. Internet users in suburban and remote regions continue to depend on 4G towers. The situation deteriorates further during winters due to prolonged power outages and insufficient backup capacity, leaving consumers without access to telecom and internet services for extended periods.

Recently, the federal government auctioned 4G spectrum to commercial entities, including Jazz, Zong, and Telenor, alongside SCO. However, due to limited backhaul capacity and SCO's

monopoly over core infrastructure, these operators are compelled to rely on rented bandwidth from SCO. The high cost of such arrangements and the limited bandwidth allocation render them incapable of providing internet speeds comparable to those available in the rest of the country. Moreover, the potential benefits of the recently connected Pakistan–China gateway through the Khunjerab Pass have yet to materialize for consumers in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The Special Communication Organisation, with its limited resources and low-profit margins, cannot be solely blamed for the current state of affairs. Achieving high-speed telecom standards requires enormous investment, costly hardware, and continuous innovation, capacities that only multinational corporations can realistically afford. Coupled with internal operational inefficiencies, SCO is currently ill-equipped to meet the rapidly increasing demand for reliable and high-quality telecom services.

In addition to infrastructure and operator-level challenges, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), the regulatory body responsible for ensuring service quality and enforcing standards, has also failed to fulfill its mandate. Although 4G services are nominally offered in the region by SCO and other operators, their quality and reliability remain highly questionable when measured against national and global benchmarks. Despite this, PTA has largely remained silent, reflecting a clear lack of regulatory will.

Recently, the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan has adopted the 'Cloud First' policy to fast-track digitalization and improve governance through e-governance, however, the present state of affairs paints a grim picture for the prospect of digitalization and government's efforts towards e-governance, for a region which is already the most vulnerable and sensitive to climate-change induced calamities. Without addressing the issue of adequate infrastructure, the government's efforts in other areas will bring no real change.

Recently, the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan has adopted a 'Cloud First' policy aimed at fast-tracking digitalization and improving governance through e-governance initiatives. However, the current state of telecom infrastructure presents a grim outlook for the realization of these objectives. For a region already vulnerable to climate change-induced disasters, the absence of reliable digital infrastructure severely undermines governance reforms and development efforts.

Gilgit-Baltistan, an underdeveloped region with a growing freelancing community that relies entirely on internet connectivity for income, faces ever-increasing consumer demand for reliable digital services. Without adequate resources and funding, particularly through inclusion in the Universal Service Fund, for upgrading backend infrastructure, placing high expectations on SCO alone is unrealistic. It is therefore imperative

that the incoming government places the inclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan under the Universal Service Fund among its highest priorities. Equally important is the rationalization of SCO's role by transitioning it into a neutral infrastructure host and fostering a collaborative ecosystem that allows other market players to access bandwidth on fair and competitive terms.

Until these issues are addressed, or a viable alternative such as Starlink's satellite internet becomes available—the people of Gilgit-Baltistan will remain dependent on an outdated system, with frustration continuing to mount.

<https://pamirtimes.net/2026/01/29/a-region-left-behind-gilgit-baltistans-struggle-for-digital-access/>

Muqam vows implementation of JAAC agreement in 'Azad Kashmir'

Daily Times, 30 January 2026

The Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs, Gilgit Baltistan and SAFRON Engr Amir Muqam on Thursday chaired a meeting to review implementation status of the agreement with the Joint Awami Action Committee, 'AJK'. The Federal Minister Engr Amir Muqam expressed satisfaction over the progress achieved to date and directed all concerned departments to further speed up the implementation work, said a press release here on Thursday.

He said that 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' is a top priority of the Prime Minister and providing relief to the

people is a joint responsibility of the federal and 'AJK' governments. Engineer Amir Muqam assured that, in line with the Prime Minister's instructions, full and effective implementation of the agreement with the Joint Action Committee would be ensured.

Coordinator to Prime Minister for Kashmir Affairs, Gilgit Baltistan and SAFRON Shabir Ahmad Usmani, Secretary Kashmir Affairs, Gilgit Baltistan and SAFRON Zafar Hasan, Chief Secretary 'Azad Jammu & Kashmir', Khushhal Khan and Additional Secretary Kamran Rehman Khan also attended the meeting.

Officials from relevant ministries and departments briefed the meeting on the steps taken so far, while the Chief Secretary 'AJK' shared a detailed update on the implementation process.

The meeting was attended by senior officials from the ministry of Kashmir Affairs, GB & SAFRON, 'AJK' government and representatives of Civil Aviation, National Health Services, Planning Commission, Communications, National Highway Authority (NHA), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), Power Division, Water Resources and Federal Education.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/1443433/muqam-vows-implementation-of-jaac-deal-in-ajk/>

The Time for Change Is Now

Pamir Times, 31 January 2026

In the shadows of the towering Himalayas, Hindu Kush, and

Karakoram mountains, where rivers flow with a whispered promise of progress, lies a region where half of the population remains politically muted, their voices drowned by the echoes of patriarchy. Gilgit-Baltistan, a land of breathtaking beauty and untapped human potential, is also a place where women's political aspirations are routinely marginalized, their leadership potential locked away, and their right to representation pushed to the periphery.

By and large, women in Gilgit-Baltistan continue to be confined within rigid patriarchal frameworks, where their identities are shaped by social conventions and established patterns that restrict autonomy and agency. This pervasive system perpetuates the notion that women's existence is contingent upon validation from the dominant narrative, limiting their access to spaces of power and decision-making.

The dismal underrepresentation of women in politics exposes the region's profound democratic deficit, a harsh reality that imperils the very fabric of governance. Despite constituting approximately 46 percent of registered voters, women's representation in the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly remains woefully inadequate, with only a handful of reserved seats occupied by women. This exclusion has severe consequences, as women's perspectives and priorities are systematically marginalized in policy formulation, reinforcing patriarchal hegemony and entrenching structural inequalities.

The quota system, originally designed to promote women's political participation, has paradoxically created a complex dilemma. It has cultivated the perception that women are only viable within reserved seats, thereby undermining their credibility in leadership roles. As a result, women who contest outside the quota system are effectively sidelined, while those occupying reserved seats often face questions about their capacity and legitimacy. The ability of women elected on reserved seats to meaningfully represent women's interests and influence policymaking remains under intense public scrutiny, and in many cases their role is reduced to symbolic tokenism.

Furthermore, the repeated allocation of quota seats to a select few has fostered patronage-based politics, where women's representation is tied more closely to party hierarchies than to the will of the electorate.

Countries such as Rwanda and New Zealand demonstrate that meaningful change is possible. Rwanda currently has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world, with women holding over 60 percent of seats in the lower house. New Zealand, operating under a proportional representation system, has consistently maintained high levels of women's parliamentary participation. These examples illustrate that with the right policies and political will, women's inclusion can be transformed into a cornerstone of democratic governance.

In Pakistan, political parties are legally required under Section 206 of the Elections Act, 2017, to allocate five percent of general seats to women. Yet implementation remains weak, with many parties failing to embrace this provision, thereby preserving the status quo of exclusionary politics.

It is imperative that political parties adhere to the law, shatter the glass ceiling, and create genuine pathways for women's leadership rather than confining them to symbolic quotas. A paradigm shift is needed, one that prioritizes merit-based participation, education, and institutional reform. Such a shift would enable women to enter public life based on their capabilities and contributions, ensuring their perspectives are organically integrated into policymaking processes.

Pakistan, a nation that produced the first Muslim woman Prime Minister, Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, must now translate this legacy into tangible progress for women in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The women of this region are not asking for favors; they are demanding their rightful place in the corridors of power. Their participation is not optional, it is fundamental to sustainable development and participatory governance.

The future of Gilgit-Baltistan hangs in the balance. The women of this region will no longer be silenced.

<https://pamirtimes.net/2026/01/31/the-time-for-change-is-now/>

Only registered parties to contest 'AJK' polls, EC tells political groups

Dawn, 1 February 2026

The 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' Election Commission (AJK-EC) has reiterated that only political parties duly registered under the Elections Act, 2020, will be eligible to contest the forthcoming elections to the region's Legislative Assembly. It warned parties with incomplete registration that they would neither enjoy statutory privileges nor be allowed to contest polls on an allocated electoral symbol.

The clarification follows an 'AJK' High Court judgement dated Oct 5, 2023, which set aside the registration of the 'AJK' chapters of the PPP, PML-N and PTI and other parties on the grounds that the registration process did not conform to the requirements of the law and the Constitution of the region.

In its judgement, the court observed that the Elections Act and Rules prescribed mandatory conditions for party registration, including submission of a party constitution, manifesto, audited consolidated accounts, lists of members with proof of identity, and evidence of intra-party elections. The bench further noted that despite failure to fulfil several of these conditions, the parties had been granted provisional and later regular registration, rendering the process unlawful. Following the judgement, the EC issued notices to all political parties, directing them to remove

deficiencies identified by the court and resubmit complete documentation.

In the aftermath of the ruling, mass defections of lawmakers elected on PTI tickets in 2021 to the PPP and the PML-N were overlooked by the relevant authorities.

"In pursuance of the High Court's judgement, all political parties that do not presently fall within the definition of registered political parties are hereby informed that unless and until they complete all requisite documentation in accordance with the applicable rules, they shall neither be entitled to any privileges of a registered political party nor be eligible to contest any forthcoming election on a specific electoral symbol," the EC said on Saturday.

"Accordingly, the heads of all political parties whose registration is currently under process are advised to urgently submit the required documents in line with the intent of the 'AJK' Elections Act, 2020, the Elections Rules, 2020, and the High Court's judgement, so that the registration process may be finalised."

An official at the Election Commission told Dawn that registration had been granted to five parties between July and October 2024 after fulfilment of legal requirements.

The parties registered so far included the PML-N and the PPP, along with three relatively lesser-known organisations — Jamaat-i-Falah-i-

Insaniyat, Markazi Jamiat Ahle Hadith and Sada-i-Haq Party — none of which has had parliamentary representation in the past.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1970293/only-registered-parties-to-contest-ajk-polls-ec-tells-political-groups>

Veteran Kashmiri leader Barrister Sultan Mahmood passes away at 73

The Nation, 1 February 2026

Veteran Kashmiri leader and 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' (AJK) state President Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry died in an Islamabad hospital on Saturday, he was 73, family and official sources confirmed.

According to media reports, Sultan breathed his last in Islamabad. His funeral prayers will be offered today (Sunday) at 4.00 pm at Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah Cricket Stadium in Mirpur 'AJK'. Born in 1953, in Chechian, Mirpur, Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry received his early education in his hometown, completed Matriculation in Rawalpindi and graduated from Gordon College. He later earned a Bar-at-Law degree from the United Kingdom. After returning to Pakistan in 1983, he entered active politics and went on to play a central role in 'Azad Kashmir's political landscape for decades. He also served as Prime Minister of 'AJK' as well as Leader of the Opposition, and was elected nine times as a member of the 'Azad Kashmir' Legislative Assembly from Mirpur. He was elected President of 'AJK' in 2021 and was widely known

for forcefully raising the Kashmir issue at international forums. He raised the Kashmiri case staging rallies and demonstrations in front of the United Nations, European Union and various institutions in the United States, and led large-scale Kashmir marches in London, New York, Brussels, Dublin and Berlin.

President Asif Ali Zardari Saturday expressed deep sorrow and grief over the death of 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' President Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry.

The President prayed to Allah Almighty to grant the deceased a high place in Paradise. The President also expressed his condolences to the bereaved family, while describing the national and political services of the late leader as valuable.

Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif on Saturday expressed deep grief and sorrow over the demise of the President of 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry. The premier prayed for the elevation of the ranks of the departed soul and for patience and fortitude of the bereaved family. He stated that the late Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry was a wise and seasoned politician. Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry had devoted his entire life to serve the people of 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir'. The PM said, "Today, the people of 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' have lost a great leader in the form of Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry." The late Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry raised a

strong voice for the Kashmir cause and against Indian atrocities on the Kashmiri people. He mentioned that the services of Barrister Sultan Mehmood Chaudhry for the Kashmiri people and his struggle for the Kashmir cause would always be remembered in history.

<https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2026/veteran-kashmiri-leader-barrister-sultan-mehmood-passes-away-73>

Economic Developments

'AJK' cabinet approves health card scheme, Danish School Haveli plan

The Nation, 29 January 2026

The 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' (AJK) cabinet has approved the launch of a Health Card scheme across the state to expand access to medical treatment for citizens. The cabinet meeting was held in Muzaffarabad under the chairmanship of 'AJK' Prime Minister Faisal Mumtaz Rathore. During the session, members also approved the allocation and transfer of state land for the establishment of Danish School Haveli and formed a four-member committee to resolve matters related to Healthcare Hospital Mirpur.

Speaking at the meeting, Prime Minister Rathore outlined the government's key priorities, including public welfare, education, healthcare, and development initiatives. He said the Health Card scheme would enable common citizens to directly access quality healthcare services and reduce

their financial burden in obtaining treatment.

Officials said further details regarding the rollout and implementation mechanism of the health card programme will be announced separately.

<https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2026/ajk-cabinet-approves-health-card-scheme-danish-school-haveli-plan>

UK-based charity to expand orphan sponsorship programme in 'AJK'

Dawn, 29 January 2026

British Member of Parliament and human rights lawyer Imran Hussain on Wednesday said that nearly 12 per cent of the population in 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' (AJK) and Pakistan was living below the poverty line, warning that limited economic opportunities, rising inflation and inadequate access to basic services had contributed to a serious humanitarian challenge.

Addressing a press conference at the Central Press Club Muzaffarabad, he said the international humanitarian organisation 'Orphans in Need' was currently supporting 1,200 orphaned children in 'AJK' and planned to expand its sponsorship programme to cover 2,000 children across the region in the next phase. He added that the programme would subsequently be extended to other areas of 'AJK'.

Mr Hussain said 'Orphans in Need' was caring for more than 40,000 orphaned children in 14 countries

across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, providing essential facilities including shelter, healthcare, food and education. He acknowledged the vital role played by overseas Kashmiri and Pakistani communities in sustaining the organisation's welfare initiatives.

He said the care, education and proper upbringing of underprivileged and orphaned children in Pakistan — particularly in 'AJK' — remained among the organisation's top priorities, adding that its welfare mission was being expanded on sustainable and long-term lines. Mr Hussain was accompanied by a high-level delegation of 'Orphans in Need', including Head of Fundraising Altaf Hussain Khan, Community Fundraising Coordinator and Board Member Muzammil Khan, and Pakistan Country Head Muhammad Faisal Ishaq.

Speaking about his parliamentary work, the Labour MP for Bradford East said that as a barrister and human rights expert, he had been raising issues such as child poverty, child labour, social protection, legal aid and serious human rights violations in the British Parliament. Referring to Kashmir and Palestine, he said he considered it his responsibility to contribute to international legal efforts against war crimes and human rights abuses.

He said the organisation had recently launched two major welfare initiatives in Pakistan, including the distribution of food parcels among needy families

in Bahawalpur and the implementation of a structured, long-term child sponsorship programme in Muzaffarabad, under which hundreds of children would receive education, healthcare and nutritional support.

Emphasising the importance of family-based care, he said a child's healthy development was best ensured within the home environment. He explained that under the organisation's Home Setting Support Programme, children were supported while remaining with their families, enabling them to live dignified lives with access to basic necessities.

Speaking on the occasion, representatives of the 'Orphans in Need' asserted that the organisation had been carrying out relief activities in Muzaffarabad and other underdeveloped areas of 'AJK' and Pakistan in a structured and transparent manner to help reduce social deprivation and restore human dignity.

They said fundraising efforts over the past six to seven months had been accompanied by transparent assessments to ensure assistance reached deserving families without discrimination. They reiterated that all relief work was carried out in line with principles of transparency, accountability and integrity. They added that while the organisation planned to expand its welfare programmes to other neglected regions of Pakistan over the next decade,

Muzaffarabad and Bahawalpur had been prioritised due to the scale of need and the high number of sponsorship cases.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1969554/uk-based-charity-to-expand-orphan-sponsorship-programme-in-ajk>

GB winter adventure tourism hit by soaring permit fee, visa delays

Dawn, 1 February 2026

Adventure tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has declined over the past three years, with no foreign climber or trekker visiting the region during the winter season. The arrival of climbers, trekkers, and both foreign and domestic tourists during the summer season also fell by 90 per cent last year, severely affecting the local economy.

Tour operators blamed the sharp increase in permit fees, delays in the issuance of visas to foreigners, and other factors for the decline in foreign visitors. According to the GB tourism department, no foreign climber or trekker visited GB this winter. No foreign expedition or trekking group was issued a permit during the winter expedition season, which usually lasts from November to February.

Five of the world's 14 eight-thousanders — mountains rising above 8,000 metres above sea level — are located in Pakistan. These include the world's second-highest peak, K2 (8,611m), followed by Nanga Parbat (ninth at 8,126m), Gasherbrum-I (11th

at 8,080m), Broad Peak (12th at 8,051m) and Gasherbrum-II (13th at 8,035m).

Until 2023, hundreds of foreign climbers and trekkers used to visit the region each winter to attempt ascents of K2, Nanga Parbat and other peaks. However, data obtained from the GB tourism department shows that not a single foreign climber or trekker has visited the region during the winter season since 2023.

Director of the GB tourism department Iqbal Hussain said multiple factors had contributed to the decline in winter tourism. He said international conflicts and global uncertainty had led to a reduction in the number of foreign climbers and trekkers visiting Pakistan.

Meanwhile, arrivals of both foreign and domestic tourists during the summer season also declined last year, badly affecting the local economy. Liver Khan, a prominent tour operator and a member of the Pakistan Association of Tour Operators (PATO), told Dawn that the government's anti-tourism policies had contributed to the decline in both foreign and domestic tourism in GB.

He said around 90 per cent of the local population — including labourers, transporters, hotel and shop owners, travel agents, tour operators and porters in remote areas — depended on tourism as a source of income. He added that the sharp increase in permit fees for mountaineering and trekking, coupled with difficulties in obtaining visas, had discouraged foreign visitors.

Mr Khan said foreign tourists usually plan their trips to Pakistan at least three years in advance, based on their budgets. He explained that Pakistan issues three types of visas to foreign tourists: tourist, mountaineering and trekking visas. Mountaineering and trekking visas are issued only after permits are obtained through Pakistani tour operators. Delays in issuing these permits, he said, often result in visa delays and ultimately lead to the cancellation of trips.

Mr Khan said PATO had demanded that the government introduce a single visa category for foreign tourists and simplify the process for mountaineering and trekking visas. He said the increasing permit fees had forced foreign climbers and trekkers to cancel their trips to Pakistan and opt for Nepal or other countries, where permits are cheaper. Nepal, he noted, had reduced permit fees for more than 50 peaks.

Another tour operator, Mohammad Ali Nagri, told Dawn that the increase in permit fees for foreigners had virtually crippled adventure tourism in GB. According to the GB tourism department, only 270 international climbers visited the region during the summer season last year to attempt peaks including K2, Broad Peak, Gasherbrum-I, Gasherbrum-II and Nanga Parbat, compared to more than 2,000 foreign climbers and trekkers in previous years.

Officials attributed the downturn to unprecedented climate-related

disasters in GB, as well as regional tensions and conflicts involving Pakistan and India.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1970289/gb-winter-adventure-tourism-hit-by-soaring-permit-fee-visa-delays>

From Vernacular Urdu Media

Kashmir issue is central point to our struggle: Faisal Mumtaz Rathore

Jammu and Kashmir Times, 27 January 2026

'Azad Kashmir' (AJK) Prime Minister Faisal Mumtaz Rathore met with former member of the Kashmir Council, Babar Ali Zulqarnain. 'AJKs' political situation, along with issues of mutual interest, were thoroughly discussed.

On this occasion, Prime Minister Rathore mentioned that 'AJK' is witnessing a political change based on strong, upright, and people-friendly policies. He further added that regaining public trust, transparent governance, and stability of institutions remains the government's priorities.

The 'AJK' Prime Minister further said that the Kashmir issue is central to their struggle, and for this, all social forces must come together and play their respective roles. For 'AJKs' development and the welfare of its people, consultative measures will continue to be undertaken in the future, added Rathore.

Former member of the Kashmir Council, Babar Ali Zulqarnain, while expressing confidence in Prime

Minister Rathore's leadership, stated that he will cooperate with government initiatives aimed at 'AJKs' welfare and development.

<https://jammukashmirtimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Resize-of-FRONT-PAGE-27.jpg>

Muzaffarabad's development-related projects remain unfinished due to lack of funds: Khawaja Farooq Ahmed

Urdu Point, 28 January 2026

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) central leader and MLA from Constituency 3, Muzaffarabad, Khawaja Farooq Ahmed, has drawn the attention of Prime Minister Raja Faisal Mumtaz Rathore to the incomplete development projects in Muzaffarabad that are either in the pipeline or have remained unfinished due to the non-availability of funds, urging him to take a special interest in ensuring their completion.

He emphasized that attention should be given to enhancing the beauty of the city, including its roads, parks, and the upgradation of colleges. He said it is the duty of all members of the Legislative Assembly of the state, especially the 10 MLAs from Muzaffarabad Division, to work collectively for this purpose.

Khawaja Farooq Ahmed stated that additional funds should be allocated for the repair and extension of the walkway up to Plate and further to Domel; the completion of Fatima Jinnah Lady Park at Beli Noorshah; the

completion of Nuluchi Ground; the provision of required funds for completing the Bailey Bridge from Rashidabad to Manik Piyaan Camp; the restoration of the old route from Old Kutchery to Tariqabad; funds for the construction of the approved link road from Naya Mohalla via Guff Road to the former National Hotel; the beautification and development of the ground at Jinnah High School Plate; the repair of the Trekking Walkway; and other important projects, including the rehabilitation of Neelum Park.

He suggested that a meeting of all stakeholders should be convened regarding these projects so that everyone can play their respective role in beautifying the city. He said that the capital belongs to everyone and should not be limited to the constituency of any single MLA. It is the collective responsibility of all—whether in the opposition or the government—to work together to make the capital attractive, beautiful, and appealing from a tourism perspective.

He also pointed out that the historic fort at Plate still requires attention, questioning why its construction has not been completed even after five years and whether the quality of the work being carried out meets the required standards, which he said should also be closely monitored.

<https://www.urdupoint.com/pakistan/news/muzaffarabad/kashmir/live-news-4697473.html>

Weekly POK News Digest

Volume 6 | Issue 4

26 January - 01 February 2026

Compiled by

Dr. Mohd. Usman Bhatti and Mr. Muneeb Yousuf

Edited By

Ms. Sumita Kumar, Coordinator, POK News Digest

Disclaimer

PoK weekly News Digest is a collection of news reports and press releases published in various newspapers and local media related to Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), referred to as 'Azad Kashmir' and 'Gilgit Baltistan' by the Government of Pakistan. The news reports have been edited and abridged to provide clarity. MP-IDSA is not responsible for the accuracy and authenticity of the news items. The Institute does not subscribe to the views expressed.



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

No. 1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi-110 010

Telephone: 91-11-26717983; Fax: 91-11-26154191

Website: www.idsa.in; Email: pokdigest@gmail.com