

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: UK aid to Pakistan, HC 216

Tuesday 2 March 2021

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Theo Clarke; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Navendu Mishra; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 1 - 16

Witnesses

I: Dr Farzana Shaikh, Associate Fellow, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House; and Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, Senior Fellow for South Asia, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Farzana Shaikh and Rahul Roy-Chaudhury.

Q1 Chair: I would like to call the start of the first session of the International Development Committee's inquiry into Pakistan. We are very grateful to be joined by Farzana Shaikh, associate fellow on the Asia-Pacific programme at Chatham House, and Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, senior fellow for south Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Could I ask you both to briefly introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your work? Then I will ask Committee members to come in with specific questions.

Dr Shaikh: As you said, I am an associate fellow at Chatham House with the Asia-Pacific programme. I have been there since 2005. During this period, and long before then, I have also had an academic career. In fact, much of my life has been divided between, on the one hand, wearing an academic hat at times and, at other times, dealing with policy. My specialism of course is Pakistan, and I have a wider interest in south Asian Islam. I suppose I should also say that this is not the first time I have given oral evidence to a parliamentary Committee. I have done so for the Foreign Affairs Select Committee as well as the interparliamentary group on Kashmir. Nevertheless, it is a great privilege and honour to be called by this Committee to give evidence again.

Chair: We thought we were special until you said that.

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: My name is Rahul Roy-Chaudhury. I am the senior fellow for south Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, which is a leading think tank on international security, with headquarters in London. At the IISS, I research and publish policy-relevant briefs on regional security and organise track 1.5 meetings that bring together top Government officials and experts from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan to discuss measures to help build regional stability amid competitive trilateral relations.

Q2 Chair: We are holding this inquiry because Pakistan has been, and we assume will continue to be, one of the biggest beneficiaries of UK overseas development assistance. Thinking about that particularly, I wonder if I could ask you both to respond to a really broad question. What do you believe are the biggest challenges and opportunities for Pakistan?

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: Pakistan's single biggest challenge is to counter and curtail the growth and spread of the vicious ideology of religious extremism, in the absence of any effective action against local jihadi groups with terror links that also impact adversely on Pakistan's relations with its neighbours. These jihadi groups have been fuelled over the years by Pakistan's political power dynamics, sectarian violence, prejudicial laws and inflammatory educational publications, as well as the foreign policy decisions of its Government towards both Afghanistan and India.



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In July 2019, for example, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, publicly stated that there were 40 different militant groups operating in Pakistan, with some 40,000 militants in the country. This was after several years of a very successful campaign that the Pakistani army was able to undertake against local-based jihadi groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Unfortunately, the policy of the Pakistani Government towards militants who are waging a conflict against them is very different from the policy of local jihadi groups that are waging conflict against Afghanistan and India. To me, the key issue will be how Pakistan is able to tackle effectively this culture of jihadi violence and religious extremism.

The opportunities lie in Pakistan being able to effectively discharge some of its priorities from the state apparatus to counter the narrative and operation of these jihadi groups, and to ensure that they do not have an impact in terms of cross-border terrorism in relation to Afghanistan or India. That makes the relationship between Pakistan and these two other countries very difficult and fraught with uncertainty.

Dr Shaikh: As I see it at the moment, there are three broad sets of challenges in Pakistan. One is obviously the current state of political instability and turbulence. There is no meaningful national consensus or agreement between the Government and Opposition parties on key issues relating to institutional reform, macroeconomic reforms, et cetera. The other great challenge is economic uncertainty, which is closely tied to Pakistan's very fragile economy. It has been under increasing pressure from the difficulties Pakistan currently faces in terms of not, as yet, being seen to abide by all the benchmarks set by FATF.

Finally, of course, there are regional tensions. There is forever the threat of conflict between India and Pakistan, and the threat of instability on Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan. All this has a very vital bearing on developmental challenges, the question of whether aid can be delivered and whether this aid can be safeguarded in a meaningful way for the groups that are most in need of assistance. These are the broad challenges that I would list in the first instance for Pakistan.

The opportunities are there. There has been, despite what Rahul has just said, a marked improvement in the security situation in Pakistan. If that continues, it should generally expand aid access to those regions and sections of the country most in need of aid. I have some figures here. Since 2015, particularly, this improvement in security has led to a marked decline in terrorist attacks. There were an estimated 4,000 terrorist attacks in 2013, and these have dropped to around 400 in 2020. Despite Rahul's well-taken observations and the challenges I have outlined, the improved security situation provides a much more optimistic possibility for aid and development aid to be delivered to Pakistan.

Chair: The Committee would like to delve a little deeper into some of the topics you have raised and introduce some new ones.



Q3 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Good afternoon, everybody. Picking up on some of the things you have just raised, looking at the impact Covid-19 has had on Pakistani society, how would you say that has affected it?

Dr Shaikh: Like every other country in the world, Pakistan's economy has been hit hard by Covid, though it appears to have weathered the storm rather better than most other economies in south and south-east Asia. This may have to do with the fact that Pakistan is, relatively speaking, rather less well integrated into the global economy than other economies in the region. Therefore, it is possibly relatively better protected against the shocks that have jolted other economies.

Pakistan's economy has also been cushioned by a sharp rise in remittances from overseas Pakistanis, especially from Pakistanis working in the Gulf states. It is worth noting that, over the last eight consecutive months, remittances have totalled \$2 billion to Pakistan, which is significant.

Pakistan has had a relatively low number of Covid deaths and cases. Deaths at the moment stand at roughly 12,800. The total number of cases is about 500,000. This has mystified some observers. Some have pointed to underreporting, others to inadequate testing in the country, and yet others to Pakistan's bulging youth population. More than 60% of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30, and we know this group to be rather less vulnerable to the virus than other age groups.

Having said that, Government officials believe that the main reason for Pakistan having handled this crisis better than most of its neighbours lies in the Government's policy of so-called smart lockdowns. These have targeted virus hotspots across the country while allowing the economy itself to continue functioning. The Government can certainly take credit for alleviating some of the most damaging social consequences of Covid. There is a social protection and poverty alleviation scheme, known as Ehsaas, which is said to have benefited something like 12 million families in Pakistan through emergency cash handouts during the pandemic.

There are fears, though, that these gains will be compromised by a recent very controversial decision from the Government to allow private companies to import Covid vaccines and exempt them from price caps. The Government argue that, without the involvement of private companies, Pakistan would not be able to vaccinate its population of 207 million. Nevertheless, there is concern that this decision will reinforce existing disparities in access to healthcare at a time when rising inflation, currently around 11%, and poverty have left millions struggling. Some 6.5 million people are expected to be out of jobs in the fiscal year 2020-21. That gives you, broadly, the kinds of difficulties that Pakistan faces with Covid, but also the way in which it has emerged, mysteriously enough, relatively unscathed compared to some of its neighbours.

Q4 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I was going to ask in terms of Pakistan's economic development, and you have given us a very good in-depth



summary. In terms of how it has affected the poorest communities, you mentioned that. Do you think that is something to focus on now alongside the economic development? Have the poor been particularly hard hit?

Dr Shaikh: Yes. I am quoting official figures: 6.5 million people are expected to be out of jobs next year. One issue I would like to bring into play is the gendered impact of Covid. There have been several studies since mid-2020 that suggest Covid has had a particularly damaging effect on women. This is because of its impact on Pakistan's informal economy, which of course is dominated by women. Covid has also taken its toll on health services. Essential health services for women and children across Pakistan have been disrupted. Most reproductive health and family planning facilities are still not functional across many parts of Pakistan.

As elsewhere, there has also been a disturbing rise in reported cases of gender-based violence during the lockdown. Pakistan has seen a surge in reported cases of domestic violence against women. This is, again, in the informal work sector. Government officials recently reported a 25% increase of cases of domestic violence against women in some eastern districts of Punjab province. The Government are aware of this. The Ministry of Human Rights is working with the UN Population Fund and the Islamabad-based non-governmental organisation Rozan. They are now working on developing higher standards for shelters for women during Covid-19. It is hoped that these sorts of shelters will be extended across the country.

Q5 **Chair:** I am very interested in the increase in remittance into Pakistan, because I know it has been dropping around the world, and tying that to the projection of 6.5 million people being out of work. Does that out-of-work figure include people in the informal economy, or is it on top of people in the informal economy? Also, is it reasonably common for people to work overseas and send money home, or are those remittances from people who have permanently emigrated?

Dr Shaikh: To answer the first question, I cannot be entirely sure that that 6.5 million figure relates to both the formal and the informal economy. I simply do not have that information to hand. It is common, mainly for male workers who leave Pakistan and seek employment abroad, to send part of their earnings to their families based in Pakistan.

People have, of course, raised the question of how it is that there has been such a sharp rise in remittances. There is a general agreement that it shows that much of the remittance is being channelled through official means. In other words, the informal ways of people carrying remittances, the so-called hawala system, is now pretty much being closed down. This is, of course, because of pressure from the FATF. Pakistan wants to be seen to be officially controlling the flow of money across its borders. Much of the inflow is now going through official channels, which is why we are seeing such unusually high levels. In the past, they were much lower



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because people were having these remittances come across the border informally. That option has pretty much been closed off now.

Q6 **Chair:** I would imagine that is also a direct impact of Covid stopping international travel.

Dr Shaikh: Yes, that too.

Q7 **Chris Law:** How is the China-Pakistan economic corridor changing Pakistan? What impact is it having upon its relations with neighbouring states, in particular both Pakistan's and China's relationships with India?

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: Pakistan's official narrative over the China-Pakistan economic corridor, which is a flagship venture of the belt and road initiative, has been very powerful. When it was formally proclaimed by China six years ago, we were looking at the provision of \$62 billion of investment from China coming in for transport, port and energy infrastructure projects from Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to Gwadar in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Since then, things have soured. The scale of the projects has decreased, but it is reported that about \$25 billion of investment has already come into Pakistan. A number of projects have started, including the commercial operations in Gwadar port. Reportedly, about 75,000 jobs have been created.

There have been more and more questions on issues of transparency, the debt that Pakistan is in, in relation to China, over the loans that it has taken and the commercial viability of certain projects. The concern is that, if Pakistan is not able to repay the debt appropriately, it could lead to Chinese control of some of these strategic projects in Pakistan, as you have seen in Sri Lanka. Essentially, for Pakistan this continues to be a major source of funding, the largest investments coming in, and the narrative continues to be very powerful, notwithstanding the questions.

This has really changed the nature of Pakistan's relations with China. Whenever I have been travelling in Pakistan over the last few years, I have always asked my interlocutors a question: in terms of the ambassadors and high commissioners of different countries, who is at the top and who is at the bottom? Several years ago, the answer was that the American ambassador is the most powerful. Then you have the British high commissioner and then you have others. When I was in Pakistan over a year ago, the view was quite different. It was that the Chinese ambassador was the most powerful, even more powerful than the Saudi ambassador. Then you had the Emirati ambassador and then the British ambassador.

In a way, you have a situation where, for Pakistan, China is now really up front and centre. There is no going back on this unless there can be alternative sources of funding for Pakistan's projects, which it desperately needs for its own economic development and success. When I talk to my interlocutors in Pakistan about the Biden Administration and the policy towards Pakistan, the very strong view is that the Biden Administration



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would have to accept that Pakistan and China have close relations. Relations between Pakistan and the US will have to be taken on the basis of the proximity of Pakistan-China relations. In fact, I would go further: it could be useful for Pakistan to be a negotiating partner between the US and China. This is a very powerful narrative that has come to stay, despite the challenges in operational terms.

Q8 **Chris Law:** I was asking about neighbouring relationships, particularly with India, not least because it is going to be surrounded by three sides. You have Pakistan, China and Chinese-occupied Tibet, which leaves it quite vulnerable. What further dangers does this present, given that all three are nuclear powers, with contested claims to land and regular border infringements?

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: Pakistan is very keen to extend the China-Pakistan economic corridor into Afghanistan. Recently, the Prime Minister, Imran Khan, was in Sri Lanka. He highlighted the opportunity for Sri Lanka to increase the connectivity of central Asia through CPEC. Neither country has so far accepted Pakistan's proposals on this issue. India, meanwhile, has consistently opposed CPEC, because of two factors. First, it sees that there are CPEC projects taking place in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, including in Gilgit-Baltistan, which India claims as its own. It has protested the projects on the basis that they should not be in territory that India considers to be its own.

The second and more focused reason is that India considers these projects to be providing not simply economic value but geostrategic value for China to be able to exert influence and presence into the region. This exacerbates the tensions we have seen in the last few months between India and China. For India today, Chinese projects in Pakistan, along with the heightened tension between India and China, are an added source of concern. India's opposition has been consistent. To the extent that it has been so, other countries, including the US, have slowly started being critical of CPEC projects in Pakistan, especially the Pakistan-China relationship.

Q9 **Chris Law:** Given Pakistan's Prime Minister's positioning of himself as a fierce defender of Muslims worldwide, why does he remain silent on the persecution of Muslims in China, in contrast to the comments of others such as Macron, Zuckerberg or here? What reaction has there been to this domestically? How has this affected Uyghur populations within Pakistan? I will extend that a little further, and this is for both the witnesses. What impact does this have on the UK's relationship with and aid to Pakistan, given recent criticisms of genocide against Uyghurs in China?

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: That is a very important question. From what I see coming out of Pakistan, the official narrative on this and, indeed, the rhetoric in cases, the view is that, because of the close relationship between Pakistan and China, all issues are discussed bilaterally between



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the two countries. The sense is that possibly these issues are discussed as well, but I am not sure that that is the case.

The reality is that Pakistan, which has its own human rights issues, has been comforted by the fact that China has never really queried Pakistan on human rights issues. At this stage, Pakistan is not going to be in a position or even willing to query China on issues with the Uyghurs in China. On that issue, we are not going to see any positive movement. This is a strategic relationship, with strategic consequences for both partners and their neighbours. Human rights concerns are not a part of that strategic relationship in either country.

It is very important for the UK to have a strong relationship with Pakistan for several reasons. There is a large Pakistani diaspora in the UK. The UK has considerable influence in Pakistan, and access as well. A number of key Pakistani leaders, mostly opposition leaders at the moment, are in the UK. Pakistan is requesting them to return to Pakistan. It is important for the UK to continue this relationship with Pakistan. In the end, it is not going to be the critics of Pakistan who are able to engage it in a forward-looking manner. It will be a country that Pakistan has a traditional relationship with and, dare I say, trusts. The UK is one of those countries. The US is not, for example.

It is interesting to me that, since Imran Khan became Prime Minister in August 2018, he has visited Saudi Arabia six times, China three times and the US once, but he has never visited the UK as Prime Minister. There is a question there that I have no answer to.

Chair: That is very interesting.

Q10 Chris Law: Farzana, I wondered if you had anything you would like to add to that. We are hearing about the relationship with China, and China not criticising the issue of human rights in Pakistan. I wondered what your thoughts were on where the UK's relationship and aid is with Pakistan, given the recent criticisms of genocide against the Uyghurs in China.

Dr Shaikh: There is not much in what Rahul said that I would disagree with. It is a matter of some consternation, certainly within Pakistan as well as abroad, that the Government appear to be selective in their choice of which group of Muslims they will pass their judgment on, or which Government's treatment of their Muslim minority they will choose to pass their judgment on. For example, the difference between Prime Minister Imran Khan claiming that he does not really know anything about what is happening to the Uyghurs in China, and his rather strident stance vis-à-vis France and the larger issue of islamophobia, leaves many people a bit mystified at what appear to be double standards.

Of course, as Rahul put it, there are significant strategic interests at play here. While Pakistan can afford to inflame relations with France, it simply cannot afford any such tension to come into its relations with China, and



I think everybody understands that. Pakistan would not, of course, be exceptional as a country that puts its national interests first. We have had the Biden Administration condemn Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and hold him directly responsible for the death of Khashoggi, but, at the same time, refuse to sanction him or sanction the country.

Chair: Farzana, we are focusing on Pakistan in this inquiry.

- Q11 **Mr Sharma:** Hi, Rahul and Dr Shaikh. In the last year or so, I have been organising youth summits on south Asia: eight countries, young activists in the different fields coming together and talking about gender equality, youth opportunities and working together for peace in the region. They are coming with their own experiences in their own countries and trying to bring some kinds of solutions. It may not be a summit, but certainly your contribution, Dr Shaikh, will be quite useful for us to understand your own assessment of the standing of women and girls in Pakistan society.

Dr Shaikh: That is a very vital area for discussion, only because I believe that one of the most significant challenges facing Pakistan at the present time is the shrinking space for women to exercise their rights. There are five key areas that I would like to say a few words on. Many of these areas pertain directly to the Committee's stated interest when it comes to aid to Pakistan. The first is the question of women's education, followed by the issue of forced and early marriages, the forced conversion of women from minority communities, human trafficking of girls from minority communities and, finally, something I have already touched on, which is the problem of domestic violence against women.

When it comes to women's education, as elsewhere, Covid has disrupted education in Pakistan and women's education has been badly hit. Having said that, it is right therefore that much of UK aid to Pakistan, half of it I think, about 53%, is spent on education, with a focus especially on female literacy. That is still shamefully low, at around 47%. Nevertheless, UK aid spent on education in Pakistan ignores wide regional disparities, which carry significant implications for female literacy. For example, much of the UK's development aid for education is directed to the Punjab, where the overall literacy rate at the moment stands at around 64%, with about 50% for female literacy. However, in regions like the south-western province of Balochistan, where overall literacy rates stand at around 40%, female literacy is just 27%. That is said to be among the lowest in the world.

The other question I wanted to raise for the Committee is forced and early marriages, something that would fall broadly within what we nowadays call modern slavery, a stated concern of the Committee. As we know, Pakistan is committed to eliminating forced and child marriages by 2030, in line with sustainable development goals. In 2019, the Government of Pakistan reiterated their stand against child marriage by announcing multiple initiatives, including a child marriage Bill, to



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establish the same minimum age for the marriage of both sexes, in order to curb the practice of early marriages.

Unfortunately, an amendment to the colonial-era Child Marriage Restraint Act was introduced in the Senate, the upper House of Parliament, in 2019, which was passed by a majority and would have increased the minimum age of marriage for women from 16 to 18, was opposed by religious parties. They insisted that the Bill should be sent to the Council of Islamic Ideology, a body that advises Parliament on Islamic law. The council ruled that any amendment prohibiting child marriage is un-Islamic and would “lead to many complications”.

To date, therefore, what do we have? We have Pakistan’s Parliament essentially powerless to pass national legislation declaring child marriage a criminal offence or to legally sanction such egregious cases as the reported marriage just last month of a 64-year-old MP from the south-western province of Balochistan, representing a religious party, to a girl just 14 years old. It was condemned in Pakistan’s national Parliament this week, but, as I said, Parliament itself is unable to enforce the law in any meaningful fashion. Sindh is the only province in Pakistan where a law, the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, passed in 2014, sets the minimum age of marriage for girls and boys at 18 and holds child marriage to be a punishable offence.

Another issue that is disturbing is the question of forced conversion of women from minority communities. This has been a bit worrying to human rights groups in Pakistan and abroad. Most of the girls who are forced to convert belong to religious minorities in Pakistan and are forced to convert to Islam. According to rights groups, last year an estimated 1,000 women, largely underage girls from non-Muslim minority communities, were forcibly converted. They think that this figure of 1,000 applies roughly to the last five or six years. It is difficult to establish these figures. Most of the girls who are said to have been forcibly converted are impoverished Hindu girls from Sindh. There have also been some recorded cases involving impoverished Christian girls from Punjab, as well as a few reported cases involving young girls from Sikh communities.

The subject of forced conversions, which falls within the remit of provincial governments in Pakistan, has met much the same fate as Bills to outlaw child marriage. In 2016 and then again in 2019, the Sindh government tried and failed to pass legislation setting a minimum age of 18 for conversions, having met with opposition from religious parties. It needs to be said that the problem of forced conversions is further complicated by claims, often upheld by local courts, that the conversion itself was voluntary, though most such cases have been shown to involve the use of financial incentives to lure poor and vulnerable young women to convert and marry. Bear in mind that, once these girls are converted, there is no going back, as apostasy can entail the death sentence.



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Mr Sharma: Thank you very much, Dr Shaikh, for your detailed response to the question.

Chair: Can I bring in Pauline Latham to pick away at some of those details?

Q12 **Mrs Latham:** To be honest, I am quite shocked about some of the things you said, Dr Shaikh, not because it is you but because of the subject matter. I am particularly shocked about the Member of Parliament—did you say 64?—marrying somebody of 14.

Dr Shaikh: Yes.

Mrs Latham: In my view, that is child abuse and should not be allowed to happen. No matter who says it is okay, it should not be allowed to happen. Something I am trying to do in this country is to stop child marriage under the age of 18. With parental consent, we allow it at 16, which is wrong in my view. I am trying to stop that, and it is in part to stop people being brought from Britain into other countries, married very young and then brought back to the UK.

You also said earlier that sexual, reproductive and contraceptive care is not available at the moment. Is there any evidence that young girls who have been married are having children younger than they perhaps would have done if there had been any contraceptive care available for them? Is it older women who are using the contraception, rather than younger girls, when they have perhaps completed their family, rather than those who want to delay having a family?

Dr Shaikh: I do not have exact facts and figures for you. I can say that for many years there has been a reasonably robust family planning programme in Pakistan. There is no doubt that it has met with resistance, mainly from religious parties, which feel that large families are the duty of any good Muslim family. There is a great deal of pressure for large families. I do not have information to hand on whether young girls are being forced to become pregnant by being denied access to contraception. Prima facie, reports would suggest that this may well go on and may well be the case in many rural areas particularly. I want to say that, while I do not have any firm figures or facts to give you on this, if I were to be provided with those facts and figures, I would not be at all surprised.

In terms of what Rahul was saying earlier about Pakistan-China relations, I want to make a point about the trafficking of young women, which is a disturbing and growing phenomenon in Pakistan. In recent months, there have been disturbing reports of a rise in the human trafficking of young girls. Much of this involves the trafficking of young girls from Pakistan's impoverished Christian minority, concentrated mainly in Punjab, who are reportedly being sold as brides to Chinese men or forced into prostitution in China. Rights activists in Pakistan have documented more than 600 such cases between 2018 and 2019, but they claim that their



investigations have been consistently thwarted by officials, who fear that they will jeopardise Pakistan's close relations with China.

Q13 Mrs Latham: That is a very interesting and shocking fact. Rahul, I wonder if we could change the subject. You said earlier that \$2 billion a month is coming in from remittances. That is an awful lot of money coming into Pakistan. It puts our aid programme to shame, because it is \$24 billion a year. Other countries, as well as the UK, put money into Pakistan. Pakistan also has a space programme. Why should countries that have a fund for developing countries put money into Pakistan when those sorts of sums of money are coming in every month? Why is it making no difference? It is still a very poor country.

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: I think it was Farzana who mentioned the figure of \$2 billion. I never raised the issue of remittances, but I am happy to address the latter part of your question. That is essentially why a country like Pakistan should be given aid if it is spending so much more on space, defence and nuclear weapons, for example. My sense is that it is twofold. First, these programmes—space, defence and nuclear weapons—are quite opaque. They are not transparent. We do not know the amount of funding that goes into them, except loosely for the defence budget, which is approximately 3.5% of the country's GDP.

One argument is that a country like Pakistan, which is in a difficult neighbourhood, in terms of its own perceptions, needs to secure its frontiers. It needs to have deterrents with countries in the region. That argument is valid, but only to a certain extent. It is also important to try to ensure that levels of nuclear deterrence, for example, between India and Pakistan are kept as stable and as minimal as possible. There is a good argument, not as to why Pakistan should have nuclear weapons but as to why Pakistan's nuclear programme should be as active as it is, in terms of developing new capabilities, new longer-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. That is a valid question. There is no answer to that, because that question may not have been asked properly.

The second reason is that, for Pakistani society and the Pakistani state, it is very important to distinguish between the civilian aspects and the military aspects. We have all written about these issues and the tensions between civil and military relations. The Pakistani military exerts a great influence over the civilian leadership, including, in this Administration, Prime Minister Khan. The question here is not that there should be a resumption of civilian power in relation to the military, which is not likely to happen in the near future, but that the civilian Government should be more empowered on issues of providing development capacity, to ensure that it reaches the people it needs to reach, through NGOs and others, and that the military role in these areas is minimised.

The reason I say that is that a project like the China-Pakistan economic co-operation, for example, has a very strong military footprint, not only on security issues but also in the management of those tasks. Those are the issues that should legitimately be challenged, rather than the overall



picture of asking, "Why should Pakistan have nuclear weapons or an army?"

Chair: It is always very important to make that distinction between civilians and Government decisions. Unfortunately, on international policy, quite a few people forget to do that.

Q14 **Theo Clarke:** What impact has the delivery of aid programmes had, particularly on NGOs in Pakistani society? I am particularly interested in the environment for charities and how that has changed over the last decade.

Dr Shaikh: This is a vital question, and one that represents a major challenge. I would like to answer it in two ways, by looking first at the Government's policy on NGOs and then, more worryingly, at attacks against aid workers. There is no question that there has been, over the last couple of years, increasing pressure on international and local NGOs and aid organisations in Pakistan from authorities, which claim that these organisations are promoting what they say are foreign—that is to say western—agendas. According to Human Rights Watch, for example, which surveyed developments in 2020, there has been a significant rise in the "intimidation, harassment and surveillance" of NGOs and their staff in Pakistan.

In January of this year, a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan took fresh notice of "foreign funding" and the promotion of a "foreign agenda" by NGOs. That raised fears that further restrictions were going to be placed on aid organisations and NGOs. Rights groups now claim that this is all part of an orchestrated crackdown and a broader plan by the authorities to silence dissent. That said, it is worth recalling that one of the first acts of the Government of Prime Minister Imran Khan, upon assuming office in 2018, was to close down the operations of 18 foreign NGOs involved in poverty alleviation and human rights, on grounds that they had failed to work within the remit of their "stated intent".

The suspicion of foreign aid organisations and local partners is not new. This needs to be borne in mind. It dates back most clearly to the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, when the Save the Children fund was wrongly implicated in supervising a fake vaccination programme to establish bin Laden's whereabouts. Since then, foreign NGOs and their local partners have been seen by some as covers for foreign intelligence operations and by others as the disseminators of "liberal values" against Islam. One of the more worrying consequences of this development has been to widen the space for Islamic charities, some of which are known to have ties with militant Islamist groups.

Having said that, all this comes against the background of what appears to be a fresh uptick in attacks against aid workers in Pakistan. There have been disturbing signs of an upward trend, as we saw a couple of weeks ago in February, when four women were killed in Pakistan, in North



Waziristan, near the border with Afghanistan. They were aid workers who were helping women in this very conservative region of Pakistan to run small businesses by selling handicrafts from home.

Of course, these attacks are not new. Since 2012, in Pakistan we have had about 102 health workers and the security staff protecting them killed in a campaign waged against polio vaccination, again mainly in the north-west of the country. Included in this figure of 102 were 70 so-called lady health workers, women who had left their homes to go and take part in this programme to vaccinate children. It is worth bearing in mind that Pakistan is just one of two countries, the other being Afghanistan, where polio is still to be eradicated.

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: I have nothing to add to what Farzana has said.

Q15 **Mr Sharma:** The contribution from Dr Shaikh has been very impressive. I am not saying Rahul is not impressive. He brought many issues that are quite close to the hearts of many on the Committee as well, child labour and trafficking. All those issues are very familiar to us, but what we read and hear outside, Dr Shaikh, is that, in practice—you also indicated it—cultural and religious influence in the society is not letting it happen. You admit it yourself. You said 102 health workers were killed because they were just going around and giving vaccines for polio. In south Asia, Pakistan is the main country where we still have polio. Others have eliminated polio to some extent.

Can you share if there is any movement by not only the women's groups but by society at large on sexual and reproductive health and rights issues becoming part and parcel of the education system, where the children are taught? Is there flexibility or freedom in that, where people do not hide behind anything else? In your view, is there any such movement to help women progress in society on those issues and through the education system?

Dr Shaikh: It is much less through the formal education system, but a fightback against what I and others would call the norms of the patriarchal society is being waged by women's groups in Pakistan. Many of them are urban-based, but they are extending their networks in rural areas. They are intent and determined to have the rights of women, particularly in the area of equal rights to healthcare and reproductive health, all these sorts of things, extended to all women.

It is a long, hard and difficult struggle, because Pakistan still remains a very conservative society and one where religious groups have exercised a disproportionate influence on social policy. It is not as if there is no fight going on, but the fight and the struggle for equality and gender parity is one that is continually being resisted. The whole question of gender violence and domestic violence is an issue at point. Women's groups in Pakistan have been waging a very concerted, active and, I would go so far as to say, militant campaign to bring the issue of domestic violence against women into the public sphere.



It is estimated that some 5,000 women in Pakistan are killed every year in acts of domestic violence. Every time there is a move to tighten legislation against domestic violence, it has met with opposition from religious parties on grounds that they are covert attempts to promote feminism, which is judged to be a “western agenda”. That is a view shared by some sections of the present Government at the very highest level. Laws on domestic violence against women have consistently failed to secure a national consensus. That has the result that, in Pakistan at the moment, we have a patchwork of laws to curb specific offences against women, which range from dowry killings to acid attacks and honour killings, et cetera.

Even if you take something like honour killings, which are quite pervasive across Pakistan, there is legislation in place to curb honour killings, but its application has proved to be extremely difficult. By honour killings, I mean where victims are accused by their killers of having brought dishonour to the family by engaging in illicit relations between the sexes. There was a law passed against it by Parliament in 2016, but, as I said, application has been difficult. When an honour killing occurs, often at the hands of a family member, the family of the victim, more often than not, is likely to forgive the perpetrator.

Q16 Chair: This session is to get your opinions, views and thoughts to shape our forthcoming inquiry. I wonder if each of you could tell us the one thing you would like an inquiry into the UK aid going to Pakistan to cover.

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury: I would suggest two things. You are looking at £300 million going in annually, the UK being the largest provider of aid to Pakistan. The first thing is very important. It is how you are able to shape the nature of the civil-military relationship in Pakistan. As I said earlier, it is very important to seek to empower the civilian element in this relationship. It is not an easy ask, clearly. British aid to Pakistan is just one aspect of the multifaceted and strong relationship that the UK has with Pakistan. Now, with the amalgamated FCDO, I believe there is an opportunity here to look at the foreign policy objectives to Pakistan that the UK has and link it with aid in that respect.

The second area I would suggest is to seek to help Pakistan counter the single biggest challenge that I said early on, which is the religious extremism and the culture that goes with it. Farzana has also talked about it in terms of the role of the ulema in Pakistani policy. In many ways, it is linked to terrorism in the region. Importantly, there are, for example, educational textbooks, possibly funded by UK aid, that are horrific and inflammatory in what they write about the different communities in Pakistan and the relationship Pakistan has with other countries. There is opportunity here, again, to put together the foreign policy objective of a stable Pakistan, a friend of the UK, with development within the country, socially and politically. That will have an impact in helping Pakistan emerge as a pillar in a much more stable regional environment.



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Dr Shaikh: I would broadly agree with what Rahul has just said. I would add that, while I would certainly not favour attaching conditionalities to aid, I believe that more stringent accounting or accountability mechanisms can be introduced. I believe that donors, including the UK, have a responsibility to the groups they target, as being most in need, to ask recipient Governments like Pakistan to explain their spending priorities. To give you just one small example, Pakistan allocated \$7.85 billion for defence and a mere \$151 million for health in the budget for the financial year 2020-21. That is a sobering thought.

Chair: Yes, very. "Shocking" is the word I would use. Rahul, Farzana, thank you so much for your generosity and the time and information you have given to us today. Thank you very much to Committee members as well for a really interesting line of questioning. I look forward to this inquiry as it starts to unfold and urge people to submit written evidence to us as well.