



AZAD JAMMU AND KASHMIR



HIGHLIGHTS

- In a tragic incident off the coast of Greece, hundreds of irregular migrants from AJK lost their lives when their boat capsized. The migrants included 30 young men from just one village, Bandli in Kotli district, of whom 28 drowned and only two survived.
- There were widespread public protests against government subsidy withdrawal on wheat flour and electricity price hikes.
- Following a government crackdown on demonstrators, 48 police reports were filed on sedition and treason charges, and 53 arrests were made.
- In an unprecedented move, AJK premier Sardar Ilyas was disqualified by the AJK High Court for derogatory remarks against the judiciary.
- The second phase of local body elections was completed but the newly elected local bodies remained dysfunctional due to lack of financial and administrative powers.
- Contentious legislation on defamation was introduced in the AJK assembly, aiming to tighten restrictions on free speech. In response, media bodies and civil society organizations launched widespread protests across the territory.
- An overall increase in crime was reported, particularly gang-rape, rape, harassment, and crimes against women and children, with many cases going unreported.
- Owing to ongoing massive deforestation in Neelum Valley, the AJK cabinet approved a proposed ordinance aimed at implementing a complete ban on deforestation.



OVERVIEW

Kashmir remains disputed territory and has been administered both by Pakistan and India since the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947. Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is regarded as an autonomous region and not a formal province of Pakistan. While AJK has a degree of self-governance, its autonomy is constrained in several key areas as it remains closely tied to Pakistan in matters such as defence, foreign policy and economic dependence. The Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan Affairs serves as a link between the Government of Pakistan and that of AJK.

The human rights situation in AJK has not received much attention. There are no dedicated human rights organizations or individuals to monitor human rights abuses in AJK. Due to the limited national media presence in AJK, there is less coverage, resulting in no significant documentation available to formally assess the state of human rights in the territory.

In 2023, AJK experienced severe human rights violations amid widespread protests against the government's decision to withdraw subsidies on wheat flour and increase electricity prices. The crackdown on activists and demonstrators led to arrests, with accusations of torture in custody.¹

The AJK premier was disqualified for derogatory remarks against the judiciary. A new coalition government was formed that faced challenges in cabinet appointments and functioning of local governments.

In June, a boat carrying hundreds of irregular migrants, many of them from AJK, capsized, with scores drowned. Killings near the Line of Control (LOC) further complicated the situation. Despite efforts to combat human trafficking and other crimes, the crime rate reportedly increased, particularly crimes against women and children, with many cases going unreported. Environmental problems such as wildfires and deforestation persisted, highlighting ongoing challenges in governance and accountability in AJK.



RULE OF LAW

Laws and law-making

In 2023, the AJK Legislative Assembly held several key sessions and made significant legislative and procedural decisions. Throughout the year, the assembly remained active, holding ten sessions over 120 days in total.

It passed one amendment to the interim constitution, allowing for an expansion of the cabinet, as well as 14 new laws and amendments to two existing laws, apart from budget and monetary bills. The year saw political manoeuvring, budgetary discussions, and legislative changes aimed at governance and development in AJK.

In June, the Assembly removed a constitutional provision limiting the state cabinet to 16 ministers, allowing for an expansion of the cabinet. Chaudhry Latif Akbar was elected the fourteenth speaker of the Assembly, despite some opposition boycotts. After this amendment, the premier of AJK inducted 31 members into his cabinet, making it the largest cabinet in the history of AJK.

Administration of justice

AJK's judicial system comprises various tiers, with an apex court, the Supreme Court of AJK, functioning as the highest judicial authority. This court includes an appellate bench with three judges, including a chief justice, and operates with circuit benches in Rawalakot and Mirpur, in addition to its headquarters in Muzaffarabad. The high court also plays a significant role, with the camp presence at divisional levels and a Shariah Appellate Bench. Further down the hierarchy, district and session courts, as well as sub-judges' courts, operate at the district and tehsil levels, respectively.

Judicial positions and cases pending. As of the latest available information, the Supreme Court of AJK is operating at full strength, while the high court has six judges instead of nine, with one vacant position in the Shariah Appellate Bench.

While no record of cases in the Supreme Court is publicly available, this year the AJK High Court and its circuit benches disposed of 10,439 cases while receiving 10,110 new cases, leaving a backlog of 16,139 cases, all less than five years old. The subordinate courts disposed of 63,221 cases, while 58,964 new cases were filed; currently, 44,432 cases are pending.

Notice to prime minister. A full-court bench of the AJK High Court served notices to Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas, asking him to explain his derogatory remarks about the judiciary, leading to his

disqualification on 11 April on grounds of contempt, rendering him ineligible for public office. The AJK Election Commission promptly issued a notification.²

Earlier, the ousted prime minister, during a public meeting, had accused the judiciary of hindering the functioning of his government and interfering in the executive's domain through the grant of stay orders. He said that although the stay orders were only temporary and needed to be decided quickly, they continued for years. He was summoned by both top courts simultaneously after his remarks and disqualified from holding office in an unprecedented manner. On 12 April, the legal team of the former prime minister filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against his disqualification verdict by the AJK High Court, but the appeal was later rejected.

Online hearings. In May, the AJK High Court introduced a video link system connecting its principal seat with all circuit benches to facilitate online hearings, enhancing access to justice and efficiency.³

Relief to PTI lawmaker. In October, the AJK Supreme Court's division bench granted interim relief to an opposition PTI legislator, staying the verdict of an election tribunal until appeal disposal.⁴ The PML-N's Chaudhry Ismail Gujjar had filed a petition against PTI legislator Chaudhry Maqbool for alleged rigging during the 2021 elections for the AJK Legislative Assembly. It took the Election Commission two and a half years to recount the vote and nullify the previous result.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

Law and order

Crime statistics. According to records from the AJK police, the total number of cases registered in 2023 rose to 9,962 compared to 8,578 in the previous year. However, this figure likely underrepresents the actual number of incidents due to citizens' reluctance to report crimes, especially in cases of crimes against women such as rape, attempted rape and harassment.

There has been a notable increase in cases involving murder, violence against women, rape, burglary, and narcotics offenses, with 78 cases of murder, two cases of gang-rape, 27 rape cases, and 348 cases of abduction/*zina* [unlawful sexual relations] reported during the period.⁵

Positive developments. In January, the AJK Police Department established a 'school of investigation' in the state capital Muzaffarabad to enhance the investigative capabilities of police personnel.⁶

In April, AJK Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas launched a special complaint and tracking portal to improve governance, providing easy access to the government, an online complaint lodging facility, and timely grievance resolution.⁷ However, there is no record available as to how many complaints were registered or resolved through the portal.



The AJK Police Department established a 'school of investigation' in Muzaffarabad.

Trafficking. In June, the police launched a massive crackdown on human trafficking rings in Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber districts after 30 people

from the area drowned after a boat carrying irregular migrants capsized off the coast of Greece.⁸ The police arrested dozens of people suspected of working for international human trafficking rings.

Custodial torture. In July, a faith healer was found dead at the Rawalakot police station. His relatives alleged that the police had arrested him in a fake first information report (FIR) and that he was killed as a result of custodial torture. Protests erupted after the news emerged on social media and medical reports showed marks of torture on the body of the deceased. Eleven policemen were arrested in this case.

Tragedy at sea

On 14 June, an overloaded fishing trawler *Adriana*, carrying an estimated 400 to 750 migrants, mostly from Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan, sank off the coast of Pylos, Greece. Among them were 30 young men from one village, Bandli in the Kotli district of AJK. Of these, 28 lost their lives, while only two survived. The victims, aged 20 to 30, paid approximately PKR 2.2 million each to human traffickers to escape poor employment prospects and visa difficulties, seeking better opportunities in Europe.

Migration from Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber districts to Europe has increased, with obstacles to obtaining visas leading many to resort to illegal means, facilitated by local agents. These agents operate through ground and air routes to reach Libya, from where migrants illegally enter European countries such as Greece, Spain or Italy by sea. The operations involve agents affiliated with Gujranwala and Gujrat; some locals are also implicated.

Following the tragedy, the Pakistani government initiated an inquiry and detained 14 suspected smugglers. However, there is a notable absence of legislative initiatives to address the issue. The Federal Investigation Agency has jurisdictional limitations in AJK, leaving a gap in enforcement efforts. Smugglers operate with impunity in Kashmir, shielded from legal repercussions. Despite some arrests, challenges persist due to the lack of capacity in law enforcement agencies and intimidation tactics employed by smugglers. This situation underscores the urgent need for coordinated efforts between local and international agencies to combat human trafficking effectively.

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LOC killings. Despite a period of relative peace along the LOC since India and Pakistan agreed to restore the 2003 Ceasefire Agreement in February 2021, challenges persisted due to the presence of landmines and cluster bombs, resulting in tragic accidents and casualties among residents. Additionally, civilians being killed by the Indian Army when mistakenly crossing or approaching the LOC remains cause for concern.

In June, four villagers were reportedly killed by the Indian army in Dhaki Chaknarr village in Neelum Valley.⁹ According to their families, they were collecting herbs near the LOC when the Indian army resorted to firing, killed them on the spot and removed their bodies. In August, a five-year-old girl was killed in a toy bomb blast near Athmuqam.¹⁰

In September, a former Lashkar-e-Taiba commander from the Surankote area of Poonch in Indian-occupied Kashmir was reportedly shot dead by unknown gunman in a mosque in Rawalakot.¹¹ Pakistan's Foreign Office claimed India's involvement in the killing.

In October, the Indian army reportedly shot and killed four residents of Sonar village in Neelum Valley while they were searching for herbs near the LOC.

Jails and prisoners

Prison infrastructure. The infrastructure of prisons in AJK remains inadequate, with the reconstruction of central jails in Muzaffarabad and district jails in Bagh, Rawalakot and Plandri pending since their destruction in the 2005 earthquake. Additionally, jails in other regions are housed in old buildings with insufficient space for prisoners, and three districts—Neelum, Jhelum Valley and Haveli—lack district jails, resulting in prisoners being kept in judicial lockups or transferred to nearby jails. Notably, juvenile offenders are housed alongside adult prisoners, contravening legal standards.

In November, AJK High Court Chief Justice Sadaqat Hussain Raja visited the Central Jail in Muzaffarabad and expressed concern over the delay in executing the second phase of the jail's construction. He directed authorities to prioritize this issue.

Jail population and death penalty. According to data from the AJK Prisons Department in 2023, a total of 932 individuals were incarcerated in AJK's prisons, including 23 juveniles and 27 women, with three infants accompanying their mothers. Furthermore, 69 prisoners, including three women, were sentenced to death. However, no executions have taken place in the past four years.

Prisoners' privacy. In January, AJK Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas paid a surprise visit to the Central Jail of Muzaffarabad, issuing directives to improve facilities for prisoners in line with the jail manual

and humanitarian considerations. However, the implementation of these directives remains a question. The sharing of photos of prisoners, including women and children, by the Prime Minister's office on social media sparked widespread criticism due to the inadequate facilities provided to prisoners as well as their right to privacy (especially women) having been violated.¹²

Enforced disappearances

According to its website, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances acknowledged that 15 cases of enforced disappearance from AJK were pending with the commission in 2023.

Reports suggest that several residents of AJK went missing from districts close to the LOC and were later found killed or arrested by the Indian army at the LOC. The Indian army claimed they were involved in militancy or drug trafficking.

In December, the police apprehended a gang in Neelum Valley that claimed to be involved in several failed attempts to carry drugs across the LOC in Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. According to a police report, the gang also acknowledged the death of some of the missing persons who were previously involved in the same activities.



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

AJK has a predominantly Muslim population, with Sunnis forming the majority, but also hosts religious minorities such as Christian, Bahai and Ahmadiyya communities.

In recent years, mob lynching incidents following accusations of blasphemy have occurred in southern districts such as Mirpur and Bhimber.

Blasphemy charges are occasionally registered during Islamic months such as Muharram and Rabi-ul-Awal. Incidents of persecution against the Ahmadiyya community in Kotli, both in the district and city, are underreported, as they are not registered by the police and receive minimal media attention.¹³ However, no case was reported this year.

Freedom of expression

Censorship. There exists in AJK a pervasive yet invisible form of censorship that suppresses dissenting views, particularly regarding the region's status within Pakistan. This suppression impedes individuals from freely expressing themselves.

While nationalist groups advocating for complete autonomy struggle to gain visibility in traditional media outlets, they find a platform on social media. Mainstream political parties dominate the narrative in local media coverage.

The AJK government occasionally bans books that it considers prejudicial to the 'ideology of the state's accession to Pakistan'. This includes all books that propagate or discuss the Kashmiri nationalist discourse with its emphasis on independence for a united Kashmir. The government notifications issued during different times show that more than 48 books are banned by the AJK government.

In March, magistrates in Mirpur and Bhimber districts sealed two bookstores for displaying banned books on their bookshelves.¹⁴ Meanwhile, directives were issued to bookstores across AJK not to sell banned books.

Defamation bill. In December, the AJK government introduced a contentious defamation bill in the Legislative Assembly, aiming to tighten restrictions on free speech and criticism of the government and its officials. In response, media bodies and civil society organizations launched widespread protests across AJK, prompting the government to postpone the bill's debate in the assembly.¹⁵

Suspension of press club membership. In December again, the AJK Press Foundation, a controversial welfare-cum regulatory body headed by a high court judge, issued a notification suspending the membership of journalist Usman Tariq. This suspension was not only from the foundation but also from the Neelum Press Club. The suspension was imposed after Tariq allegedly posted ‘derogatory remarks’ about the foundation in a social media group. Some have raised concerns as to how a government body could suspend a journalist’s membership of a press club.¹⁶

Freedom of assembly

Throughout the year, AJK witnessed multiple instances of conflict and police crackdowns on civil society protests, underscoring the ongoing challenges faced by political parties and civic groups in exercising their rights.

Protests against high utility bills. In August, the people of AJK organized rallies and protests to voice their grievances over unfair electricity taxes, scarcity of subsidized wheat flour and the apparent affluence of the ruling class, among other public concerns.¹⁷ Several clashes between police and protesters were reported and police registered an FIR against the leaders of the Joint Action Committee. In Rawalakot, a 105-day sit-in against electricity taxes and other public grievances concluded on 22 August with a gathering at which thousands of utility bills were ceremonially burned.¹⁸



Protesters calling for the ‘boycott’ of inflated power costs burnt their electricity bills.

Student leaders in Muzaffarabad and Rawalakot blamed the government for lodging FIRs against them on charges of treason for torching electricity bills during protests or throwing them into the river.¹⁹

In September, residents of the Poonch and Mirpur divisions staged a peaceful strike in response to inflated power bills.²⁰ September also saw civil society activists in Muzaffarabad and Rawalakot discard hundreds of electricity bills into a river and burn others during public sit-ins to protest issues such as exorbitant power tariffs. November witnessed civil society in AJK protesting high power tariffs, leading to the closure of businesses, except pharmacies, and a halt in travel over the Mangla Dam. The District Bar Association also declared a strike.²¹

Excessive force. Clashes erupted between police and protestors in Muzaffarabad in September as thousands demanded an end to the steep hike in power tariffs and protested the arbitrary arrests of shopkeepers and civic leaders. According to police records, 48 FIRs were filed on sedition and treason charges, and 53 people were arrested, following a government crackdown on demonstrators, with the Joint Action Committee accusing the government of torturing those in custody.

In October, thousands took to the streets in AJK, advocating for tax-free energy, subsidized wheat flour and an end to the privileges enjoyed by the political and bureaucratic elite, marking their discontent with a wheel-jam strike.²² Police baton-charged protesters in different cities, especially in the capital Muzaffarabad.

The police also removed a sit-in camp held by the Awami Action Committee and arrested activist Faisal Jameel Kashmiri at the protest site. A police officer was injured when he was pelted with stones by a mob. Earlier, the police had managed to disperse sit-ins in cities such as Rawalakot, Bagh and Kotli.



DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political participation

Disqualification of prime minister. In 2023, the political landscape of AJK saw significant developments. At the start of the year, Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas was disqualified by the AJK High Court in a contempt case. This led to the formation of a coalition government led by former speaker of the AJK Assembly, Chaudhry Anwarul Haq, with the support of President Sultan Mehmood Chaudhry and major opposition parties PPP and PML-N.

Haq, a PTI dissident, assumed the role of the new prime minister in April after forming a coalition with other PTI dissidents and members of the PPP and PML-N.²³ Initially, the cabinet size was restricted, but it was later expanded to accommodate members from allied parties.

Other developments. The PPP also won a by-election in Bagh, defeating its coalition partner, the PML-N on 8 June.²⁴

In February, Raja Mansoor Khan was removed from the Prime Minister Inspection and Implementation Commission Chairmanship, sparking criticism from some sections of the ruling party.²⁵ Mansoor, also serving as PTI general secretary in AJK, had developed differences with Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas.

In August, the AJK government restructured the bureaucracy, focusing on the police department.²⁶ In September, the PTI expelled several members, including Anwarul Haq, who defected to the coalition government.²⁷ In November, Haq allotted portfolios to cabinet members after a five-month delay.²⁸

Local government

The completion of the second phase of local bodies polls earlier in 2023 saw the ruling PTI secure most of the top positions.²⁹ There was hope for increased participation of younger and female candidates, leading to the emergence of a new generation of political leaders.

However, towards the end of the year, the government showed reluctance to devolve administrative and financial powers to the newly elected members, resulting in dysfunctional institutions, particularly union councils. Nationalist parties and dissenting ideologies were excluded from the elections, with candidates required to affirm their belief in the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan.

On 2 March, the PTI won in seven out of ten district councils in AJK.³⁰ On 9 March, the mayor-elect of the AJK capital, along with the city's councillors, launched a protest against the perceived power limitations

of local government institutions.³¹ In July, former Prime Minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas expressed disappointment over the withholding of development funds and lack of devolution of authority to local government institutions.



RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Women and children

Violence against women and children. In 2023, crime against women and children continued to rise. According to the police's annual crime statement, there were two gang-rapes and 27 rape cases in the region. Police also reported 348 cases of *zina*/abduction during this year.

In 2022, no case of gang-rape was reported while the number of reported rape cases was 14; 321 cases of *zina*/abduction were reported. The police are often blamed for registering rape cases under *zina* laws. In general, victims avoid reporting their experiences due to cultural barriers such as victim-blaming and lack of faith in redressal mechanisms.

Certain incidents of violence against women and children created unrest in AJK. In January, a court in Rawalakot awarded death sentences to two people accused of raping a woman in 2020.³²

In March, a 14-year-old girl gave birth to a child in a Muzaffarabad public hospital; she had allegedly been raped by her father and brother repeatedly. Police found that the DNA of the new-born matched that of the victim's brother.³³ In July, police reported that a woman, a resident of AJK, was gang-raped for several days in Gojar Khan, Rawalpindi.³⁴

Mandatory hijab. A government directive was issued in March that required female students and teachers in co-educational institutions to wear a hijab without exception. The circular was signed by a deputy director and sparked mixed reactions.³⁵

Women in sports. In a positive development, the AJK Winter Sports Association and Sports Department organized the first-ever National Women's Winter Sports Championship (Saadia Khan Cup) in Ganga Choti in Bagh district. The event had 80 female athletes from eight teams representing different regions and organizations.³⁶

Transgender persons. There is no official data available on the transgender community in AJK. Some cases were reported in 2023 in which the police arrested and misbehaved with transgender persons for begging in the street and being allegedly involved in sexual activities and crime. Police in Muzaffarabad claimed that all transgender persons were 'non-local'.

Labour

Labour participation rate. The labour force participation rate in AJK, as per the 2023 Labour Survey, is alarmingly low at 22.9 percent, almost half that of Pakistan's national average.

Notably, the female labour force participation rate in AJK is even lower, standing at a mere 7.9 percent compared to Pakistan's average of 23 percent.³⁷

Underinvestment in key sectors such as agriculture, rural development and tourism has led to a crisis of unemployment, particularly affecting women and young people.

Many unemployed youths migrate to Pakistan and abroad, with a growing trend of attempting illegal routes to reach Europe.

Labour accidents. Tragically, on 14 June, a fishing trawler carrying migrants, including 30 residents of AJK, sank off the coast of Greece, prompting a crackdown on human trafficking rings in AJK by law enforcement authorities (see also Box 1).

In May, three workers died in a steel slab installation near Dhani village due to the contractor's negligence.³⁸

Demands for salary increases. In July, the AJK government announced a 35 percent salary increase for government employees.³⁹ The announcement was later implemented through a government notification.

Earlier, in February, employees at PTV Muzaffarabad Centre had protested against the removal of allowances by their management in Islamabad.⁴⁰

In December, the administrative staff at Poonch University in Rawalakot went on strike over not receiving the announced salary increase.⁴¹ They demanded a 35 percent addition to their salaries as announced by the government and implemented by other departments.



Education

Despite high literacy rates in certain districts, AJK's primary education system faces challenges such as neglect, insufficient financing and political interference leading to corruption and nepotism. The system lacks teacher training and accountability; many schools destroyed in the 2005 earthquake were never rebuilt. Solutions include implementing a robust accountability system, eradicating corruption and improving curriculum quality and teacher motivation.

Crackdown on protesting schoolteachers. In July, the government cracked down on schoolteachers for protesting and organizing a long march toward the capital city of Muzaffarabad to raise their basic pay scales. Police baton-charged the protestors in several districts and arrested several teachers, including women. The registration of the representative body of schoolteachers was also revoked in a violation of their right to freedom of association. A similar police crackdown occurred on protesting schoolteachers in Mirpur that month for organizing a long march for higher pay scales, resulting in arrests and baton charges.⁴²

Policies and dress codes. In February, the AJK cabinet approved a mandatory education policy. The same month, the Directorate General of Elementary and Secondary Education in AJK issued a circular making it mandatory for female teachers and students at co-educational institutions to wear a hijab. This received a mixed response on social and traditional media channels.⁴³

New university campus. In August, the King Abdullah Campus was inaugurated at the University of AJK, marking a significant diplomatic milestone between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.⁴⁴ The campus is considered to be the largest university campus in the region and equipped with modern and state-of-the-art educational facilities. The campus was built under an earthquake reconstruction assistance programme funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Health

Healthcare in AJK faces a number of key challenges such as shortage of human resources and infrastructure, particularly in remote areas. However, its health indicators are better than in the federating units of Pakistan, with an infant mortality rate of 47/1,000 infants and a maternal mortality rate of 104/100,000 mothers. Efforts are underway to improve healthcare services, including the planning of new projects such as a cardiac centre and two new tehsil headquarter hospitals, as well as the implementation of vertical programmes such as the Expanded Programme on Immunization.

The termination of around 1,000 employees of the Maternal Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) Programme by the AJK government caused concern. In September, MNCH employees protested at the AJK district headquarters, demanding government regularization of services and inclusion in the normal budget.⁴⁵ Citing the unavailability of financial resources, the government has not yet extended the contracts of 1,200 employees, mostly lady health visitors, under the MNCH Programme.

Environment

Wildfires. During the autumn, multiple wildfires broke out across various parts of AJK, engulfing hundreds of acres of jungle. While the exact cause of these wildfires and the extent of losses remain under investigation, according to a Forests Department report, a total of 145 wildfire incidents occurred, affecting approximately 1,864 acres of forested land.



During the autumn, multiple wildfires broke out across various parts of AJK.

Deforestation. In the Neelum Valley, deforestation under government supervision emerged as a significant challenge. Local communities and media outlets consistently raised concerns about widespread deforestation. Illegal logging and timber transportation persisted not only in Neelum Valley but also in other parts of AJK.⁴⁶

The consequences of deforestation are dire, leading to annual natural disasters such as avalanches and cloudbursts in the valley. Additionally, the smuggling of raw timber out of the valley results in significant losses and demands immediate attention. Addressing the issue of smuggling is imperative to mitigate further damage to the environment.

In April, the AJK High Court intervened by suspending the operation of two tender notices issued by the Forests Department, effectively halting the transportation of raw wood from outside Neelum Valley due to concerns related to deforestation and smuggling.⁴⁷ Earlier, in March, the AJK government pledged to take concrete steps to conserve the territory's wildlife and natural habitats, emphasizing the importance of international wildlife conservation organizations collaborating with the AJK administration. Subsequently, in June, the AJK cabinet approved a proposed ordinance aimed at implementing a complete ban on deforestation. The ordinance stipulates a five-year imprisonment for those engaged in illegal tree-cutting, along with a significant increase in fines for such activities, underscoring the government's commitment to environmental conservation.⁴⁸

Climate change and natural disasters. The region of AJK is highly susceptible to a range of natural disasters, including landslides, floods and incidents related to glaciers. The year began with significant snowfall, followed by some of the most severe torrential rainfall and floods witnessed in recent decades during the summer months.

Comparing the official 2023 data with that for 2022 reveals a slight decrease in losses caused by natural disasters. In 2023, 12 houses were damaged and 10 individuals lost their lives in fires, while one person perished in a flash flood.

According to the State Disaster Management Authority, a total of 29 fatalities and numerous injuries were reported due to various natural calamities such as floods, rain and fires. Regrettably, the majority of flood victims, especially those who experienced significant property and financial losses, did not receive any form of compensation from the government.

Road accidents. During 2023, AJK witnessed several major road accidents, resulting in numerous fatalities and injuries. The primary causes of these accidents included poor road infrastructure, inadequate signage, lack of safety barriers, and insufficient lighting. However, due to the unavailability of official data, the full extent of the issue remains unclear. These accidents underscore the dire consequences of negligence and recklessness on the roads.

Endnotes

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