



# GILGIT-BALTISTAN



## HIGHLIGHTS

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- The political status of Gilgit-Baltistan remained unresolved; the territory has not been accorded the status of a province despite this being a longstanding demand among most residents of the area.
- The Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly passed nine laws in 2023.
- Law and order remained problematic: in one incident, unidentified gunmen attacked a passenger bus on the Karakoram Highway, resulting in 10 deaths and 25 injuries.
- Following charges of possessing a false degree, the chief minister Khalid Khurshid was disqualified from office. Haji Gulber of the PTI forward bloc became the leader of the house, with the support of the Pakistan Democratic Movement alliance. The assembly was sealed for three days after the chief minister's disqualification.
- In a welcome development, Sadia Danish became Gilgit-Baltistan's first woman deputy speaker.
- Local government elections remained overdue even after 18 years.
- At least nine journalists reported having experienced physical attacks and threats across the region.
- Various groups and communities, including members of civil society, university students, women and local residents, staged protests on a range of issues, from the exploitation of *khalsa sarkar* or communally owned land and illegal land acquisition to wheat subsidy cuts, poor internet service provision, water and electricity shortages, and lack of teachers. In many cases, protestors were arrested and charged under maintenance of public order laws.
- Several political activists, including Shabir Mayar and Hasnain Ramal, were arrested in connection with their nationalist stance.
- Although the number of persons on the list maintained under Schedule Four of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 decreased, some political workers and nationalists remained on the list.
- Hurdles to preventing gender-based violence remained: shelter homes remained incomplete, the Child Marriage Restraint Act has yet to be implemented, and a bill against domestic violence was pending.
- Positive steps were taken by the government to promote girls' education in Diamer, with over 100 home-based schools established.

- Land-related conflicts between the government and local communities, as well as within communities, continued, with illegal land acquisition by the government and land mafia increasing in the absence of land reforms and policies for barren land.
- Gilgit-Baltistan remained especially vulnerable to climate change-induced natural disasters such as glacial lake outburst floods and landslides, adversely affecting people's right to shelter, food and health.



## OVERVIEW

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The human rights situation in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) was defined by a complex interplay of legislative developments, security challenges and social issues in 2023. Its unsettled political status remained unresolved. Additionally, it remained vulnerable to climate-induced natural disasters, with thousands of people displaced by floods over the past decade still awaiting both physical and psychosocial rehabilitation. Security challenges were exemplified by the attack on a passenger bus in December on the Karakoram Highway in Chilas, resulting in casualties.

The disqualification of Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid on charges of using a false degree led to political instability, cancellation of by-elections and changes in leadership. Arrests of political activists, temporary closure of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA), and lack of approval for crucial legislation on child marriage, land reforms, prevention of domestic violence, and rules of business for laws on the rights of persons with disabilities, indicate the level of restrictions on political freedoms and legal rights.

Broader socioeconomic challenges included incomplete shelter homes, delayed local body elections, gender disparities, child abuse, suicides, 'honour' killings, and lack of access to mental healthcare. However, strides in advancing girls' education in Diamer reflect positive efforts by the government to address gender imbalances.

Civil society, student groups and various communities actively protested on issues ranging from land disputes and illegal land acquisition to education, showcasing a resilient civic response. Despite the complexities, the human rights situation in GB emphasized the urgent need for comprehensive and lasting solutions addressing security concerns and socioeconomic inequalities in the region.



## RULE OF LAW

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### Laws and law-making

Some important laws passed by the GBLA in 2023 include: the GB Civil Servant (Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Services Tribunal (Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Commission of Inquiry Act 2023, the GB Forest (Second Amendment) Act 2023, the GB Finance (Second Amendment Act 2023, the GB Judicial Academy Act 2023, the GB Food Act 2023, the GB Board of Investment and Trade (Amendment) Act 2023 and the GB Establishment of Technology Board Act 2023.

In a positive development, Chief Minister Haji Gulber Khan approved the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in October under the GB Commission on the Status of Women Act 2022.<sup>1</sup> The Cabinet, headed by the chief minister, approved the draft of the National Hazardous Waste Management Policy 2022 and the GB Rangeland Policy 2023. It also approved the establishment of special protection units for the GB police, as mandated by the Supreme Appellate Court's ruling related to timber transportation.<sup>2</sup>

### Administration of justice

**Disqualification of chief minister.** Khalid Khurshid, who served as the chief minister from November 2020 to July 2023, was disqualified by a three-member bench of the GB chief court for obtaining a license with a false degree on 4 July.<sup>3</sup>

Following his disqualification, the chief justice of the Supreme Appellate Court, Sardar Muhammad Shamim Khan, postponed the scheduled election for the new chief minister, citing procedural violations.<sup>4</sup> The disqualified chief minister alleged that the delay was an attempt to 'bully' the PTI.

Meanwhile, in response to a petition filed by a PTI worker, Rehman Darelo, the election commission imposed a lifetime ban on Khalid Khurshid, preventing him from contesting elections and heading the PTI's regional chapter.<sup>5</sup>

**Judicial developments.** In August, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved the permanent appointment of three judges to the chief court on the governor's advice. Earlier in March, the Supreme Court of Pakistan had restrained the prime minister, as chairman of the GB Council, from making further appointments.<sup>6</sup>

According to the website of the chief court, in May the GB High Court digitalized the whole judicial system, including a digital notice and summons system.



## ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

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### Law and order

In December, a passenger bus was attacked by unidentified gunmen on the Karakoram Highway in Chilas, resulting in at least 10 deaths and 25 injuries. The victims were from various regions, including GB, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh.<sup>7</sup>



*In December, a passenger bus was attacked by unidentified gunmen on the Karakoram Highway in Chilas.*

In a tragic incident in July, a 28-year-old schoolteacher, Niat Ameen, was killed in Ghizer in what was reportedly a targeted killing. Subsequently, a police officer lost his life when the police raided a residence in search of the culprits.<sup>8</sup>

In October, Raja Shakeel, a senior judge of the chief court, was attacked while out for a walk.

In August, Haji Rashid, a resident of Punjab, was shot and killed by armed men during a robbery on Babusar Road. Rashid was an assistant professor at Baltistan University in Skardu.<sup>9</sup>

Although security was tightened in Babusar after this, insecurity still prevailed among travellers on the Karakoram Highway.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1 provides a comparative breakdown of crimes in GB in 2022 and 2023.

Table 1: Police crime data for 2022 and 2023

<i>Offence</i>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Murder	63	67
Attempted murder	120	125
'Honour' killings	15	16
Hurt	151	143
Rioting	90	95
Assault on public servants	66	83
Rape	2	3
Gang rape	nil	nil
Kidnapping/abduction	45	38
Kidnapping for ransom	nil	nil
Suicide	45	47
Attempted suicide	11	6
Dacoity	7	1
Robbery	15	20
Burglary	140	173
Other motor vehicle theft	18	15
Motorcycle theft	121	181
Cattle theft	34	71
Other theft	175	207
Arms Act	272	254
Prohibition Ordinance	62	170
Smuggling	nil	nil
Other local and special laws	1	6

Source: GB police, on HRCP's request for information.



## FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

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### Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

**Blasphemy allegations.** In early September, residents of Skardu protested against the GB government for registering a first information report (FIR) against prominent Shia cleric Agha Baqir Al-Hussaini on charges of blasphemy during a clerics' conference in the city. This sparked a sectarian rift, exacerbated by proposed amendments to the blasphemy laws in the Parliament.

Earlier, in August, protestors in the Sunni-majority Diamer district had demanded the registration of an FIR against Al-Hussaini and his arrest, as a result of which the Karakoram Highway was blocked for two days. Simultaneously, Skardu saw counter-protests, seeking the withdrawal of the FIR against Al-Hussaini.

The situation became tense on 1 September, when demonstrations were held in Gilgit and surrounding areas after prominent cleric Maulana Qazi Nisar Ahmed allegedly made derogatory remarks during a protest in Gilgit. The protesters demanded action against the cleric.<sup>11</sup>

The situation prompted the closure of educational institutions, stranding tourists, and a 13-day mobile network suspension from 5 to 18 September. The issue settled after the arrest of several religious leaders from both sects and an apology tendered by Al-Hussaini.

### Freedom of conscience

Following the 9 May riots, in which PTI-led mobs damaged and destroyed public property in several cities, the Islamabad police attempted to arrest Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance on charges of attempting to provide shelter to PTI leaders. The chief minister's security and ministers residing in the house opposed the arrest, emphasizing the jurisdiction of the provincial government. He was subsequently placed under house arrest in Islamabad.<sup>12</sup>

### Freedom of expression

**Attacks on journalists.** Fida Shah Ghizri, founder of a digital media forum, was attacked by a religious group in Ghizer in December. A resolution was passed by the Tanzeem e Ahl e Sunat Wal Jamat Ghizer and an application submitted demanding that an FIR be filed against him for allegedly disrespecting the sanctity of a worship place.<sup>13</sup> The issue was settled after the intervention of the local administration.



In September, three local journalists were attacked by unknown persons in Gilgit on their way back from work. In August, a local journalist, Munir Akhtar, was attacked by unknown persons, following which he submitted a complaint at a police station in Rawalpindi.

Shams ur Rehman, a local journalist, was booked on charges of electricity theft in Astore. He claimed this was done because he had highlighted corruption in the power department. In April, the president of the Gilgit Press Club was allegedly threatened by a Special Branch official during a press conference, following which an FIR was lodged against the latter.

**Detention of civil society members.** In March, Asif Sakhi, a member of the Awami Workers Party was arrested in Hunza on charges of harassing Frontier Works Organization (FWO) officials who were reportedly trying to fix a billboard in Gojal. Seven others were also booked in the same case.<sup>14</sup>

Five members of the Awami Action Committee in Ghizer were charged in May after they announced a public meeting over a loudspeaker to protest against the lifting of the wheat subsidy and lack of civic facilities in GB.

Several activists, including Tajamul Marhoom, were arrested in July and detained for two weeks after being accused of provoking Karakoram International University (KIU) students to protest.

He was released in August. Nazeer Baba, a social activist from Skardu, was booked on charges of sedition in May for allegedly making anti-state remarks on social media.

Political activist Hasnain Ramal told HRCP that he had been arrested several times since 2017 on charges of terrorism for questioning the legal status of GB but had received no response to a questionnaire he had submitted to the anti-terrorism court in Gilgit in his defence on this matter.

## Freedom of assembly

**Civil society and students.** In October, Shabir Mayar, a political activist and chief organizer of the GB United Movement, was arrested while leading a protest against the prior arrest of Awami Action Committee<sup>15</sup> workers in Baltistan. Mayar was charged under anti-terrorism laws.<sup>16</sup>

In the same month, ten KIU students were expelled after protesting against a hike in university fees.<sup>17</sup>

In November, following increased protests by students against the hike in fees, the KIU administration issued a notification closing the university's main campus in Gilgit till further orders.

**Ban on protests.** Protests on the Karakoram Highway and Ghizer and Skardu roads were banned by the Home Department in March.<sup>18</sup> In August, the apex committee of GB, chaired by the chief minister, declared that blocking any road for purposes of protest would invite immediate legal action to maintain law and order.<sup>19</sup>

**Food and power outage protests.** Earlier in January, thousands of protestors took to the streets amid a shutter-down and transport strike across GB against land reforms, imposition of taxes, wheat shortages and prolonged blackouts in the region. In March, residents of Gilgit and Ghanche expressed their discontent with persistent shortages of electricity and wheat. In Gilgit, protestors, including women, gathered at a key intersection to protest against daily power outages lasting up to 22 hours.<sup>20</sup>



*Residents of Gilgit and Ghanche expressed their discontent with persistent wheat shortage.*

**Protests against land acquisition.** In January, 11 people were booked for blocking the Karakoram Highway during a protest demanding compensation for the land they had lost on the Bhasha-Diamer dam site.

In May, the Tanzeem e Pushtani Bashandagan of Gilgit organized a protest condemning the unlawful allotment and acquisition of land in the region. Their demands included the cancellation of all illegitimate allotments and the return of land to its rightful owners in Gilgit.

**Other protests.** In May, seven workers of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) were arrested while staging a protest in front of the Gilgit Press Club to commemorate the death anniversary of late JKLF leader Aman Ullah Khan. In August, an FIR was registered against eight

protestors in Nagar for protesting against the Special Communication Organization, the region's sole internet service provider, which is managed by the Pakistan military.

## Freedom of association

In November, KIU students demanded the restoration of student unions while protesting against fee hikes in Gilgit. Meanwhile a resolution was also tabled by a PPP member of the GBLA, Ghulam Shahzad Aga, demanding that student unions in GB be restored.

## Freedom of movement

**Schedule Four.** Although the number of persons on the list maintained under Schedule Four of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 has decreased, some political workers and nationalists remained on the list, including political activists Manzoor Parvana, Shabir Mayar and Hasnain Ramal.

**Road closures.** In August, amid other security measures, the government decided that the Karakoram Highway and Babusar Road would remain closed for traffic from 12 AM to 6 AM daily, while a convoy system for vehicles travelling between GB and other areas would be in place from 7 PM till midnight. These measures were taken after a university lecturer was killed on Babusar Road. [See *Law and order*].<sup>21</sup>



## DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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### Political participation

The political status of GB remained uncertain, as in previous years. In August, the GBLA unanimously requested the federal government to delegate authority for amending the GB Order 2018, emphasizing constitutional empowerment, judicial commission appointments, and resolution of financial allocations in the National Finance Commission.<sup>22</sup>

A protest was held outside the GBLA building in March, demanding that the assembly be convened; no session had been held for the last six months.<sup>23</sup>

**Disqualifications and aftermath.** In July, the chief minister was sent packing after the chief court determined that he had used a false degree to apply for a license from the GB Bar Council. The case did, however, raise several questions about the quality of vetting done by the election commission and the local bar council, since Khalid Khurshid had been serving as chief minister for well over two years before anyone investigated his credentials.<sup>24</sup>

Former Senate chairman Raza Rabbani strongly condemned police intervention in the GBLA, denouncing it as a violation of the assembly's sanctity and degradation of its status to below that of local bodies. Although the police had entered the assembly citing security concerns, the tactic was reportedly aimed at preventing members from voting for the nominated PTI candidate for chief minister after the disqualification of Khalid Khurshid.<sup>25</sup>

In June, the assembly speaker, Amjad Ali Zaidi, faced a no-confidence motion, leading to his ouster. Deputy Speaker Nazir Ahmed succeeded him as speaker unopposed.<sup>26</sup> In a positive development, Sadia Danish became GB's first woman deputy speaker. She was elected unopposed in July.<sup>27</sup>

In July, the Supreme Appellate Court delayed the chief minister's election, following a petition claiming a breach of assembly rules. The court's intervention came after police evacuation of assembly personnel and journalists, citing security concerns linked to 'explosive material'.<sup>28</sup>

Qamar Zaman Kaira, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan, spearheaded efforts in July to form a coalition government, engaging with political and religious leaders, including the governor Syed Mehdi Shah, opposition leader Amjad Hussain, and PML-N and JUI-F representatives.<sup>29</sup>

In July, estranged PTI member Haji Gulbar Khan became the chief minister, securing 19 out of 32 votes, following PTI candidate Khalid

Khurshid's disqualification. Raja Azam Khan, endorsed by Khurshid as his successor, boycotted the election as did Javed Ali Manwa, who led the PTI forward bloc. The PTI denounced the election as a 'robbery' of the public mandate'.<sup>30</sup>

In September, a by-election was held in Astore after the disqualification of Khalid Khurshid. His father Khurshid Khan, a PTI candidate, reportedly received the largest number of votes according to unofficial results.<sup>31</sup> However, the results were withheld, alleging rigging by the winning candidate.

Earlier in August, Planning Minister Fateh Khan of the PTI was disqualified from the GBLA when the election tribunal ruled in favour of the PPP's Jameel Ahmed for the remaining term. Jameel Ahmed, the former deputy speaker, contested Fateh Khan's victory in a Gilgit constituency in the 2020 elections, alleging rigging.<sup>32</sup>

**Budgets and funds.** The GBLA approved a tax-free budget of over PKR116 billion for the fiscal year 2023/24 in June. Opposition members criticized the government for not prioritizing local issues in the budget.<sup>33</sup> Members of the GBLA demanded an investigation into alleged corruption and misuse of funds provided for the rehabilitation of flood-affected people in the region in August.<sup>34</sup>

## Local government

The Cabinet, at its first meeting in July, decided to hold local bodies elections in the region, bringing an end to the legal battle over this issue.<sup>35</sup> Earlier in January, GB's chief election commissioner Raja Shehbaz Khan had said that the election commission was ready to hold local bodies elections, which had not been held for the last 18 years.<sup>36</sup> In July, he announced that local government elections were set for the first week of November.<sup>37</sup>

In August, the government formed committees for the delimitation of constituencies for city metropolitan corporations, municipal corporations, tehsil councils, municipal committees, town committees and union councils.<sup>38</sup> However, as a result of inadequate arrangements, these elections were not held till the end of 2023.



## RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

### Women

Local women were under-represented in every sphere of life, including the GB council, civil services, election commission, administration, works department and other important sectors.

In March, the First Annual Women’s Summit was held in Gilgit by the Dadi Jawari Public Policy Centre in collaboration with the GB government and UN Women in connection with International Women’s Day.

The summit highlighted challenges to women’s labour rights, ensuring equal opportunities in government, establishing support centres for victims of violence, addressing legal loopholes with respect to harassment, and securing land and inheritance rights for women.



*In March, the First Annual Women’s Summit was held in Gilgit.*

**Violence against women.** Reports of violence against women, ‘honour’ killings, suicide, domestic violence, and harassment at the workplace continued to emerge. A 35-year-old mother of five was killed in Ghizer, allegedly in the name of ‘honour’, in April.<sup>39</sup>

Legislation against domestic violence remained pending as of 2022. A shelter home for victims of violence (women) has been under construction for the last five years. GB still lacks psychiatric hospitals, forensic labs and medico-legal experts to deal with cases of suicide, ‘honour’ killings and violence against women.



According to police data, 16 ‘honour’ killings were registered in 2023 as well as 47 suicides and six attempted suicides. In Skardu, a girl was killed by her brother in June after a video of her went viral on social media.<sup>40</sup>

HRCP’s Complaints Cell received 50 cases of gender-based violence of a total of 80 cases during the year. Cases of cyber-harassment against women were reported during the year. In January, social media reported that a man was arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency in Gilgit for engaging in alleged cyber-harassment against women in GB.

## Transgender persons

According to local activists, the local transgender community tends to hide their identity due to social pressure. According to the Benazir Income Support Programme socioeconomic survey, at least 45 transgender children are out of school in the region. HRCP received three complaints of domestic violence from transgender persons in Gilgit, Ghizer and Hunza.

## Children

According to the District Child Protection Unit, 27 cases of child abuse – encompassing sexual abuse, physical violence, neglect, bullying, corporal punishment, child marriage, and begging – were registered in 2023. The majority of children were aged 11–15 and the bulk of cases reported pertained to male victims.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act remained pending despite advocacy attempts by the National Commission on the Status of Women. The most recent estimates from the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey conducted by UNICEF show that the child marriage prevalence rate in GB is as high as 26 percent.

According to the survey, about 50,000 children in GB are engaged in child labour, representing about 14 percent of the total population of children in the region. Violence against children continued to be reported. The Ghizer police arrested a 70-year-old man for allegedly raping a nine-year-old girl repeatedly in the Puniyal Valley.<sup>41</sup>

## Labour

The labour department was hampered severely by lack of resources and capacity, while awareness of labour rights remained low.

**Labour accidents.** Three labourers lost their lives while ten others were injured in an explosion during rock blasting at the Diamer-Bhasha dam construction site in April. The incident occurred as the labourers were

preparing explosives; a short circuit led to an accidental explosion, according to the police.<sup>42</sup>

**Government posts.** In May, GB's line department officers requested a 30 percent quota in secretariat posts, highlighting the absence of any allocation for them, unlike in AJK and other provinces.

The GB Professional and Unified Officers Association, in a letter to the chief minister and chief secretary, emphasized the officers' long-standing demand for equal rights and service benefits.<sup>43</sup>

Newly appointed lady health workers protested against the suspension of their appointment outside the chief minister's residence in January. The government had advertised over 600 positions and appointed candidates.

However, the chief minister Khalid Khurshid had suspended these appointments a day before issuing letters of appointment. Protesters alleged that the chief minister had sought to appoint his favoured candidates.<sup>44</sup> The issue was subsequently resolved after negotiations with the protestors.

## The elderly

The implementation of the Senior Citizens' Welfare Act 2022 is still pending, while its rules of business have not yet been finalized. The region also lacks shelter homes for homeless elderly people and elderly victims of domestic violence.

## People living with disabilities

Despite consistent demands from associations of persons living with disabilities (PLWDs), the Rights of Persons Living with Disabilities Act 2019 had not been effectively implemented as of year-end, with its rules of business still pending approval.<sup>45</sup>

PLWDs demanded the creation of reserved seats in GB. According to the president of the Association of Persons with Disabilities, PLWDs comprise an estimated 10 percent of the population, despite which they continue to be neglected.

A person with mental disabilities, Qasim Khan, was sentenced on charges of blasphemy by a local court in June. He had been arrested in January 2022 on allegations of desecrating a local mosque in Ghizer.

The sole hostel designated for PLWDs, housed in an educational complex in Gilgit, remained occupied by the National Accountability Bureau, despite receiving a notice from the chief court to vacate the premises.



## Refugees and internally displaced persons

People displaced by the earthquake in Rondu in 2021, glacial lake outburst floods in Hasanabad and the Attabad landslide in 2010 continued to face problems regarding rehabilitation, schooling for their children, access to healthcare and other issues.

The government's response remained lukewarm. KIU students, internally displaced by the Rondu earthquake, were banned from sitting their examination, although the chief minister announced a fee remission package for them.<sup>46</sup>

Residents of Jaglot blocked the Karakoram Highway in June, protesting against the alleged misappropriation of flood-aid funds meant for rehabilitation after glacial lake outburst flooding.<sup>47</sup> In February, flood victims in Sher Qilla in Ghizer expressed frustration over the government's lack of attention to their rehabilitation, according to a report by a local digital news platform.

## SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

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Poor road conditions led to dozens of road accidents in 2023, resulting in at least 34 deaths and 50 injuries according to figures shared by Rescue 1122. The government failed to make significant improvements to transport infrastructure in GB.

### Land grabbing

Land-related conflicts between the government and local communities, as well as within communities, have surged in the past five years. Illegal land acquisition by the government and land mafia increased in the absence of land reforms and policies for barren land in GB.

In Aliabad, a resident accused the local administration of seizing his land for a government building.<sup>48</sup> In response to widespread protests against land grabbing, the government initiated consultations on land reforms, but nationalist and progressive parties in GB rejected the process, advocating for the reinstatement of state-subject rule, similar to that in AJK. In a case of land grabbing, residents of Guro Jiglote sent an application to the chief minister and other authorities in January, alleging that the FWO had seized a piece of community land that had been rented to it earlier.

However, the FWO had neither paid rent nor vacated the land. In March, an FIR was registered in Aliabad against over 100 persons from Nagar for allegedly attacking residents of Ganish over disputed barren land in Hunza.

### Education

**Positive steps.** The GB government has taken positive steps towards girls' education in the conservative district of Diamer and established more than 100 home-based schools. The district was known to have traditionally opposed girls' education, with a female literacy rate of only 5 percent. Other remote areas such as Shigar and Kharmang are also deprived of schools and suffer constant teacher shortages. Students staged protests through the year against the shortage of teachers in Kharmang and other parts of GB.

In January, the administration had announced that it would recruit 4,000 teachers over six months to resolve the problem.<sup>49</sup> The government also started an initiative to hire 1,000 education fellows to improve the education system and overcome teacher shortages in government schools across the region over the next three years at a cost of PKR 2.19 billion.<sup>50</sup> A total of 26,266 students were enrolled in public sector schools across GB at the start of the academic year, representing a 13 percent increase in enrolment compared to 2022.

The chief secretary disclosed official data indicating that Ghizer and Kharmang had experienced the highest student enrolment, with a remarkable increase of over 22 percent compared to the previous year.<sup>51</sup>

A Chilas sub-jail was transformed into a girls' school in May, accommodating 200 students. The commissioner's house in Diامر, currently under construction, will be repurposed as a women's hostel.<sup>52</sup>

**Other developments.** The National Curriculum Council approved the Burushaski script in both Perso-Arabic and Roman in February. Burushaski, spoken by some 300,000 people, now has a dual script, giving it wider outreach.<sup>53</sup>

In 2023, KIU officials reported that a total of PKR 910 million in fees remained unpaid, citing unknown reasons for students' ability to make payments. Faculty members of KIU staged a protest in June against the financial crisis and non-payment of salaries.

## Health

Mental health remained a neglected sector in GB, as evident from increasing cases of suicide (47 suicides according to police records) and domestic violence. Despite this, GB lacks basic mental healthcare facilities, including psychiatric hospitals and rehabilitation for persons with mental ailments.

The chief minister Gulbar Khan halted the passage of a bill in August that aimed to increase the retirement age of doctors to 65 years, responding to protests by the GB Young Doctors' Association and Pakistan Medical Association.<sup>54</sup>

## Environment

GB is especially vulnerable to climate change-induced natural disasters such as glacial lake outburst floods and landslides, adversely affecting people's right to shelter, food and health.

In January, the European Union approved a grant of PKR 7.86 billion for sustainable and climate-resilient projects in GB and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The funds will be utilized for energy projects.<sup>55</sup>

## Floods

In Diامر's Tangir Valley, two lake outbursts triggered by an avalanche destroyed four homes and damaged another 40 in January.<sup>56</sup> The chief secretary announced the installation of early flood warning systems across 200 valleys in GB under the Glacial Lake Outburst Flood Project in February.<sup>57</sup>

The Pakistan Meteorological Department issued an alert for GB and some parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in June, warning of the possibility of flash floods and glacial lake outburst floods amid rising temperatures.<sup>58</sup>

Landslides triggered by flash floods blocked sections of the Karakoram Highway in Diamer, Jaglote and Skardu, leaving thousands of passengers stranded.<sup>59</sup>



*Landslides triggered by flash floods blocked sections of the Karakoram Highway in Diamer, Jaglote and Skardu.*

**Pollution and water shortages.** The GB government announced a comprehensive ban in August on single-use plastic, including bags and bottles, to curb adverse impacts on human health and the environment.<sup>60</sup> Residents of Skardu are expected to face severe water shortage as the water level in Sadpara Dam has fallen to a dead level.<sup>61</sup>

## Culture

A department of culture is not functional in GB, with little focus on the promotion of cultural activities, including the celebration of local festivals, sports and other recreational activities.

The government announced it would establish a regional languages, arts and cultural academy for the promotion of local languages and culture in 2015, but as of 2023, this has not materialized due to lack of resources. The region lacks even a public auditorium for cultural activities nor is it included in cultural exchange visits to foreign countries.

## Endnotes

- 1 CM approves establishment of 'Gilgit Baltistan Commission on the Status of Women'. (2023, October 14). *Pamir Times*. <https://pamirtimes.net/2023/10/14/cm-approves-establishment-of-gilgit-baltistan-commission-on-the-status-of-women/>
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- 6 Supreme Court restricts PM Shahbaz Sharif from appointing judges in G-B. (2023, March 1). *Daily Pakistan*. <https://en.daily-pakistan.com.pk/about-us>
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