

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

ADVANCING A NATIONAL VISION FOR PRISON REFORM

Justice, Dignity and Reform
National Conference on Prison Reform
Islamabad
2 July 2026

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

- Respected Federal Minister for Law and Justice,
 - Respected Chief Ministers,
 - Respected Judges,
 - Respected Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Development Partners
 - Respected Representatives of the Provincial Governments,
 - Respected Members of the Bar and Civil Society.
 - Respected Distinguished Guests,
 - **Respected Ladies and Gentlemen,**
- Assalam-o-Alaikum.**

I would first like to share with you two anecdotes that have had profound impact on my understanding of the criminal justice system in general, and prison's rights in particular.

1. The first relates to many years ago, when, while attending a course on prisoner's rights, my university professor was describing the facilities offered to inmates in some of the more developed European jurisdictions.

Half in jest, I remarked that if such facilities were provided in Pakistan, many **might willingly choose prison.**

The professor paused and said something, I have never forgotten. He said *“Punishment is the loss of liberty. Beyond that, the prisoner is not to suffer.”*

That answer, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, speaks directly to the question we are to deliberate upon today.

2. The second relates to not long ago, in **February, 2025**, when I visited Central Jail, Dera Ismail Khan. While walking through the barracks, I spoke with a death-row inmate in one of the cells. I asked this man all the questions, an inspecting judge would ordinarily ask:

Do you have clean drinking water?

Is the food adequate?

Do you have access to healthcare?

In response, he looked at me and, without hesitation, said:

“Sir, I do not need food, water, or medicine. Please ensure that my death appeal - pending in court since 2017 - is decided.”

Ladies and gentlemen, that was not an inmate addressing his Chief Justice. It was one human being asking another, whether the **system responsible** for his life had remembered him at all.

3. Prisons, as we know, are constitutionally a provincial subject. The responsibility for **prison administration** rests with the provincial governments.
4. This conference, therefore, is not about the judiciary **setting goals** or **redefining the limits of prison facilities**. What this gathering truly

represents is an opportunity for the provincial governments to come together under one roof, **by choice and by shared responsibility**, to address a challenge that affects not only prison administration, but the functioning and credibility of the criminal justice system as a whole. This effort, which transcends political divides, deserves earnest commendation, and I sincerely thank each of you for it.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

5. Over the course of my judicial career, I have come to understand that the **true measure of a criminal justice system** is not found solely in courtrooms or judgments. If one wishes to assess whether the criminal justice system is functioning effectively - its strengths, its weaknesses, and the remedies required - one must look beyond statistics and visit a prison.
6. Prisons are the **endpoint of the criminal justice process**. They are the culmination of investigation, prosecution, and adjudication. They expose the **system's broader philosophies**, its shortcomings, and its ability - or - inability, to balance justice, public safety, and human dignity.
7. As far as **judicial accountability** is concerned, I do not stand here claiming that the criminal justice system is delivering perfectly.
8. We have Judges duly conducting jail inspections, and the Criminal Justice Coordination Committees meeting regularly. Yet, these mechanisms have not produced outcomes aligning with the urgency of the problem. We must acknowledge this plainly, because **reform begins with honesty**.
9. But accountability does not rest with one institution alone. **A criminal justice system functions as a chain**. When one link fails, the burden shifts

to another, until it ultimately leaves its lasting scars on our prisons. As institutions in charge of the administration of criminal justice, we must all recognise that we are **responsible for human lives - lives that matter, and lives that we are answerable for.**

10. As the Chief Justice of Pakistan, who chairs the apex judicial policy making committee - the NJPMC - two foundational issues have to be addressed:

First, why, despite **regular judicial inspections** and a **statutory reporting system** in place, cases continue to remain pending beyond a reasonable period; and

Second, why **statutory grievance-redress mechanisms** within prisons are not functioning effectively, forcing inmates to seek relief from the Courts.

11. It was in this context that, three-member committees were constituted in each province, comprising two parliamentarians - one from the Treasury and one from the Opposition - each of whom had personally experienced time in prison, and a **coordinator**, who assisted the two parliamentarians during jail visits and in the formulation of their recommendations.

12. The recommendations by the committees were received by NJPMC, and subsequently shared with the respective provincial governments to address the **identified systemic issues.**

I must **acknowledge and thank** the coordinators of the committees in each province for their **time, insight, and commitment** devoted to this cause:

- For the Province of Balochistan, **Ms. Shakar Bibi, Advocate** and **Mr. Haroon Bilal Sharif, Advocate;**

- For the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, **Ms. Ayasha Bano**
- For the Province of Punjab, we had **Ms. Aaminah Qadir, Advocate**
- For the Province of Sindh, we were assisted by **Ms. Haya Eman Zahid, Barrister**

Ladies and Gentlemen;

13. This conference has, for the first time, brought all provinces to gather under one roof: **not to assign blame, but to accept shared responsibility**. The National Prison Reform Action Plan represents a **collective recognition** that piecemeal efforts are not enough. What is required is **concerted coordination and cohesive commitment**.

14. I urge every institution represented here to seriously attend to the pulse of the criminal justice system. That pulse, **Ladies and Gentlemen;** is found in our prisons. Reform the prisons, and the criminal justice system reforms itself.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

15. I, once again, extend my sincere gratitude to each of you for joining us today. Let us all resolve that our **criminal justice system remains grounded in human dignity, and build a system that future generations will be proud of**.

Inshallah.

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Thank you.