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**M O N T H L Y I S S U E**

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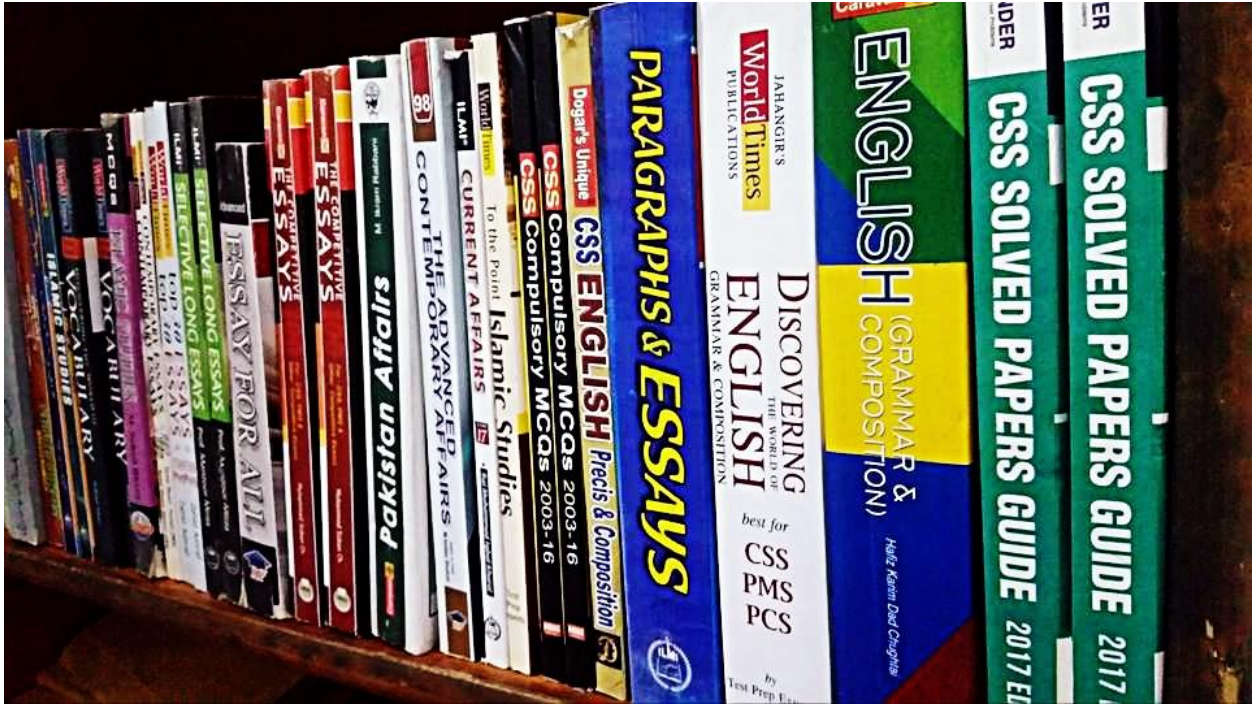


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## Canal unrest

AS unrest in Sindh increases over the Cholistan canal plan, the PPP seems unclear on how to cool public sentiments. There are strong concerns that the project will further disturb the ecological balance in the province and deprive it of its mandated water share, putting at risk the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people and displacing communities. Many in Sindh believe that the PPP, especially President Asif Zardari, has tacitly lent its support to the controversial scheme to please the powers that be. This is in spite of the party's efforts to raise the issue in parliament and demand a meeting of the Council of Common Interests before the execution of the scheme.

Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's recent media briefing was also an attempt to put at rest public concerns over the planned canal as he claimed that work on the scheme had yet not commenced. He seems to have drawn this conclusion on the basis of his information that Punjab has still not spent the funds it had allocated for the disputed canal in the budget for the present fiscal year.

In the same breath, he sought to dispel the impression that the PPP or President Zardari were implicitly favouring the plan. "The PPP has the strength and capability to halt the scheme," he said, implying that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif depended on the party's support to stay in power. "This power will be exercised only if necessary. We are prepared to go to any lengths to protect the rights of Sindh. If our concerns are acknowledged, there will be no need for extreme measures," he concluded. However, such reassurances from the party leadership are unlikely to dispel suspicions regarding the PPP's alleged complicity in the project unless President Zardari himself clarifies his stance.

The growing opposition to the project calls for pausing its execution till a detailed data-based study is prepared by experts on its potential impact on Sindh's shrinking delta due to sea intrusion driven by reduced ecological flows below Kotri. Besides, the claims that the canal would be fed by floodwaters from Jhelum or Punjab's own share should be supported with data. Boosting agricultural productivity for food security and exports is crucial for the country. But it should not come at the cost of interprovincial harmony and the federation or the displacement of communities and tenants.

With rising water scarcity in the Indus system, it is crucial to move towards a consensus-driven policymaking process. Or the canal project may turn into yet another highly divisive project like the Kalabagh dam, something that can neither be accepted nor discarded. So far those backing the project have not shown any inclination of taking all the stakeholders on board.

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## Iran-US tension

THE Trump administration's threats aimed at Iran do not bode well for global peace, and unless Washington changes its harsh tone, a new and destructive confrontation in the Middle East is very likely. Donald Trump had written to the Iranian leadership early last month, asking Tehran to resume talks on the nuclear issue. However, he also threatened to attack Iran if it failed to comply. Over the weekend, the US president again ratcheted up the threats, saying that if Iran did not return to the table, "there will be bombing ... the likes of which they have never seen before". The threat did not go down well in Tehran, with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stating in his Eid sermon that an American attack would receive "a strong reciprocal blow". These developments could simply be viewed as posturing under Trump's 'maximum pressure' campaign designed to bring the Iranians to heel. However, the accompanying military moves spell trouble. For example, the American bombing campaign against the pro-Iran Houthis in Yemen is being seen as a message to Tehran, while the US is dispatching another aircraft carrier to the region, along with assembling more bombers on Iran's periphery. Even a slight miscalculation in such combustible conditions could lead to immense devastation.

While militarily there is no parallel between the American war machine and Iran's defensive capabilities, any armed engagement would be catastrophic, hammering the global economy. After all, the US has several bases and tens of thousands of troops in the region; all of this would be within the reach of Iranian missiles in case of an attack. This is why the Gulf states have reportedly warned the US against involving them in any hostile action against Iran, while Russia has also raised the alarm. Any instability in the wider region would also have negative consequences for Pakistan, bringing another war to its borders. Therefore, the US needs to back down and engage Iran with respect. While America wants a complete rollback of the Iranian nuclear programme, this is unlikely. The Iranians are willing to negotiate, but not with a gun to their head. The following weeks will be critical; either the US can address the crisis with wisdom (which seems to be in short supply in Washington) or risk a conflagration with global consequences.

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## Flights to history

MOHENJODARO could have been the forgotten gold we desperately need. Instead, this 5,000-year-old well of antiquity is a missed opportunity. Governmental disregard, outdated preservation procedures and negligible facilities for researchers and tourists have ensured that just a fraction of this Bronze Age vestige sees the light of day. A new directive from the Larkana circuit bench of the Sindh High Court to resume commercial



flight operations, suspended in 2018, to and from the heritage site and enforce its 2022 order with immediate effect, can breathe life into Mohenjodaro. Built in 1967, the small airport, once the third busiest airstrip in Sindh with five flights per week, two charter flights and other unplanned flights, is a shadow of its bustling past. Our ancient wonders hold infinite promise. Other than becoming economic goldmines for the country, these sites promote a greater global understanding of culture; they can unlock the vast potential in tourism and export the message of a shared heritage.

Research says that, developed in 2500 BCE, Mohenjodaro is as ancient as Egypt and Mesopotamia. As the Indus Valley Civilisation waned, Mohenjodaro's dwellers moved out. R.D Banerji from the Archaeological Survey of India brought it back to life in the 1920s. But, so far, this country has failed it — excavation was halted in 1965 and revived in the 1980s — with no measures to curtail the damage from soil erosion, climate change and theft. Authorities should study the methods used by the Peruvian government to transform the Inca fortress of Machu Picchu, discovered in 1911, into tourism gold. Pakistan, a land with an enviable inheritance, deserves its own Luxor. It is the state's foremost duty to leverage these riches as tourism attractions fitted out with hotels, public facilities, security and more. For this, alongside research and anthropological activity, the traffic at its airport should increase because Mohenjodaro is the citadel of education.

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## More than words

WITH Balochistan in tumult, the political class needs to heal the province's wounds with sagacity and far-sightedness. The need for security must be balanced with efforts to bring all those forces in Balochistan that believe in the constitutional process to the negotiating table and forge a path to peace based on reconciliation and confidence-building with the state.

In this regard, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, while exchanging Eid greetings with the Balochistan chief minister in Lahore on Wednesday, reiterated that developing the province remained amongst his government's top priorities, and that all efforts would be made to improve people's lives. In a parallel development, the CM also made Eid visits to various political leaders of the province, including ex-Balochistan CM Abdul Malik Baloch. At the meeting CM Sarfraz Bugti welcomed "constructive proposals ... to promote peace and development in the province".

Mr Sharif and Mr Bugti have adopted the right approach, and though sceptics may say the state has come around to the idea of development and inclusivity a bit late in the day, one should remain optimistic, as the alternative is more violence. Development in the

province is essential, and several past administrations have made similar promises to Balochistan. But holistic development can only work when there is organic and credible political activity in the province.

Reaching out to Dr Malik Baloch was the right step, and other Baloch leaders with credibility, such as Akhtar Mengal as well as the BYC, must be included in a wider outreach. In fact, political actors from across Pakistan must take the lead in engaging the democratic forces of Balochistan and earnestly addressing the woes of the province. There must be a commitment to respect the people's political choices, along with an end to enforced disappearances and rights abuses in the province. Most importantly, both the civilian and the military arms of the state must endorse political outreach efforts to end the insurgency permanently.

Of course, the militant threat in Balochistan cannot be dismissed. Those who engage in terrorism and threaten the security of Pakistan must be dealt with through kinetic measures. But if non-violent political and rights movements are forcefully crushed by the state, the insurgency will be difficult to quell. That is why the state must make a clear distinction between peaceful activists, and violent militants, and refrain from demonising the former. If the people are not allowed to peacefully air their grievances, it will only radicalise such movements, and push them into the arms of the separatists. Moreover, hostile foreign actors will also exploit these internal fault lines to stir up trouble. Therefore, the state can begin anew in Balochistan and push for peace, or continue down the same failed path.

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## Poor publicity

FORTUNE does not seem to be favouring the PTI — at least not yet. With the party's founder confined from public view and unable to interact with his deputies and the party's rank and file growing increasingly paranoid about the circumstances of his incarceration, the PTI seems to be undergoing another round of internal upheaval. One wonders what has changed, and also how this period of turbulence might end. For context, it has lately become quite difficult for PTI office holders to confer with Imran Khan, and there has been a fair bit of discontent over who draws up his guest lists, who approves them, and why. Interestingly, in recent days, several PTI leaders who are perceived within the party to be advocates of a more conciliatory stance towards the security establishment have managed to secure long meetings with the former prime minister. At the same time, several other leaders — who were, at least till recently, being seen as loyal and dedicated to the PTI's vision and cause — have been denied an audience. Naturally, this has gotten

tongues a-wagging, and word is that Mr Khan is again unhappy with the people he entrusted with various tasks.

One must, of course, take such speculation with a healthy pinch of salt. There are many stakeholders with a strong interest in influencing the narratives around the PTI and its jailed leader, including some within the party. Nevertheless, it must still be exasperating for the party's ordinary supporters to see their top leaders behaving as erratically as they have in the past. Even though there are now few doubts regarding the PTI's resilience, the party leadership's constant internal bickering and backstabbing have discouraged much confidence in the party's health. From first impressions, it appears that the PTI remains beholden to a few individuals and cannot function smoothly in their absence. More concerning, no one within the party or its supporters seems to want this to change. No doubt, the same can be said about most other political parties in Pakistan. However, the PTI presents itself as the only solution to Pakistan's myriad problems. One would expect, as a corollary, that its leaders would demonstrate the same stability and maturity that they continue to promise to the nation. However, they keep falling short in practical application. Clearly, the party must set its house in order first.

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## Party pooper

INDIA's role of a spoilsport is tiresome. From pulling books from shelves, such as Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* to name just one, to targeting films, plays, satirists and actors with protests from far-right elements, the India-Pakistan rivalry has reached the cricket field, bookstores and the big screen. Last December, the Indian authorities halted the release of *The Legend of Maula Jatt*, a Pakistani blockbuster. This year, they ensured that Team India played its ICC Champions Trophy 2025 matches in Dubai. Now this political chill is likely to devour *Abir Gulaal*, a new film scheduled for a May release, featuring Pakistani actor Fawad Khan. As the teaser garnered substantial excitement from a large section of cinephiles, political outfits and film associations were quick to oppose the collaboration. The Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, a BJP ally known for its nuisance value, has stated that the film will not be screened in Maharashtra, while raking up the 2019 Pulwama incident.

Understandably, film bodies have little choice but to align with autocratic rulers. But the BJP-led regime's refusal to lift its cross-border cultural and sports blockade has hurt the much-touted 'Brand India' campaign; such mindless ruckus is a blow to economic benefits, legitimate businesses and stakeholders on both sides. Only piracy networks stand to gain from it. Arts, sports and culture transcend caste, creed and borders. For the

longest time, culture and cricket have served as diplomatic channels through which both countries have defused tensions and revived ties. Sadly, India's religious and identity-based politics has no space for pragmatism. The consequences of hate are often irreversible. The onus is on India to give peace and prosperity a chance so that wider discussions can take place. This will ease visa restrictions, generate religious and cultural tourism as well as revive trade. The nuclear-armed neighbours must allow soft power to resolve hostilities.

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## Electricity relief

FINALLY, some tangible relief. With the worst of the inflationary storm now behind us, the government's decision to slash the electricity tariff for domestic and industrial consumers will give honest bill-payers some much-needed breathing space in the coming months.

Their budgets ravaged by extended periods of high inflation, most households have long been at the end of their tether. Millions have been forced to make many painful adjustments in order to absorb eye-watering increases in the cost of living over the past three-odd years. These sacrifices have undoubtedly augmented public discontent against the incumbent ruling parties.

Now, the government wants citizens to know and feel that the end of the crisis is finally in sight. With prices of most items of domestic use stabilising and electricity tariffs also being slashed by a not insignificant amount, it is hoping that citizens will finally be able to appreciate the 'economic turnaround' it has long touted as its major achievement.

Likewise, domestic industry, which has been complaining loudly about losing its competitive edge ever since the government jacked up electricity prices in order to rationalise them under strict conditions imposed by the IMF, finally has something to cheer about. The electricity tariff cut will help producers trim their expenses and boost their profitability, which has excited the stock market no end. The benchmark KSE-100 Index flirted with all-time highs following the announcement as investors priced in the impact of lower electricity rates on the balance sheets of their favoured companies.

The government will obviously be hoping that its 'Eid gift' will provide a fillip to industrial activity, which has been sluggish amidst the overall slowdown in the economy. The rate cut will also help exporters, who hold the key to a broader economic turnaround, absorb some of the headwinds from the ongoing upheavals in global trade.

Most encouragingly, the prime minister has promised that the authorities will push for more reductions in electricity pricing in the coming months. Further tariff cuts are to be

achieved by curtailing losses of around Rs600bn each year due to electricity theft, opening up electricity market operations, and, finally, by either privatising power distribution companies or handing them over to the provinces, the prime minister said.

These measures have long been advocated by energy market analysts and policy experts but never meaningfully pursued by the authorities. If this government puts its foot down and manages to ensure that the requisite reforms are implemented, it will earn much praise and commendation for reforming a vital segment of the economy.

Similarly, it must also correct the imbalances inherent in other aspects of the economy, especially the obvious unfairness in the state's revenue policies, if it wishes to improve ordinary citizens' lives while meeting its obligations to foreign lenders.

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## Trump's trade wars

THE so-called reciprocal tariffs rolled out recently by American President Donald Trump have expanded his vicious trade war beyond China, Canada and Mexico onto a global scale. The new levies, which Mr Trump said are a response to the barriers placed on US exports and aim to boost manufacturing jobs at home by making imports expensive, signal the end of an era of global trade liberalisation that has shaped the world economy in the post-World War II years. That financial markets everywhere tumbled as he brandished a list of allies and adversaries slapped with steep tariffs of up to 50pc for running trade surpluses with the US underpins concerns of an imminent escalation in the current trade war towards a potential global recession. Not only are the tariffs not reciprocal, they are also based on the premise that a trade deficit is a sign that a given country is somehow treating the US unfairly. This reasoning disregards the fact that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach cannot be applied to countries with different resources and vastly different levels of wealth. The shoddy math applied to indiscriminately penalise its trading partners means that even the poorest nations have been slapped with steep tariffs just because the US buys more from them than they can afford to buy from the US. Lesotho — a tiny African nation that sells diamonds and jeans to the US — is a case in point.

The dilemma of Pakistan running a trade surplus of more than \$3bn with the US is not very different. The 29pc additional tariff dealt to Pakistan is very large, and can adversely impact its exports — three-fourths of which comprise textiles and clothing — to its single largest export destination. The situation may worsen if the US heads into a recession as is widely feared, and if competition in the European market also intensifies. Opinion is, however, divided on the size of its impact since the country's competitors — Bangladesh,

Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, etc — have been burdened with larger import taxes. The immediate question for countries such as ours is how to deal with the emerging situation. Unfortunately, the government has preferred to maintain radio silence on the issue as it appears totally clueless on how to proceed and engage the American authorities in order to get some concessions for our exporters.

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## Legalised land grab

THE Modi government has passed a new bill targeting the Muslim community, this time eyeing swathes of priceless real estate traditionally owned and managed by Muslim waqf boards. Under the new statute, the government has put its foot in the door by assigning crucial decision-making in endowment disputes to a state official. The bill renames the 1995 Waqf Act and calls it the Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency and Development Act. The stated objective is to enhance the efficiency of the administration and management of waqf properties. The opposition says it is a euphemism for land grab. The Modi government from its inception has been attacking India's minorities, the largest such community in its crosshairs being the Muslims. While Sikhs, Christians and Dalits bear the bias equally, targeting Muslims seems more institutionalised and strategically advertised. Much of the assault has come from state-sponsored mobs but increasingly, the state has become a direct party in targeting Muslims. A current example is the vengeful bulldozing of Muslim homes and shops by state governments, ignoring a bar on such action by the Indian supreme court.

The irony is that the ideologically driven ruling establishment leans on patriarchal traditions and lores to subvert the progress of Hindu women while it clamours for an anomalous role as the saviour of Muslim women. It justifies the new bill by making it mandatory for Muslim women to be members of waqf boards. Opposition leaders pooh-pooh the claim, saying women are already mandated to be board members by a preceding Act. The likeliest reason for the controversial law lies perhaps in the Modi government's overriding interest in granting favours to friendly business captains. The most extravagant building shaping Mumbai's skyline is owned by a tycoon close to the Modi regime. It was built on controversially acquired waqf land originally donated for the education of poor children belonging to a steadily marginalised and increasingly pauperised Muslim community.

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## Not cricket

It is getting embarrassing for the Pakistan cricket team, and for the sport as a whole in the country — the lack of professionalism and game awareness laid bare once again.

Even skipper Mohammad Rizwan didn't shy away from admitting that after his side were whitewashed by a second-string New Zealand in their three-match One-day International series.

In a series in which Pakistan looked severely out of their depth, New Zealand proved their recent status as the bogey side for Rizwan and his charges. They had punctured Pakistan's euphoria twice in the tri-nations series, before comprehensively beating them in the opener of the Champions Trophy; the first international event in the country in 29 years, where Rizwan's men went out without a whimper.

The series in New Zealand offered a chance for a reset, but once again, Pakistan fell woefully short. It was a no-contest in the end, with the Black Caps winning the three games by 73, 84 and 43 runs, respectively. However, Pakistan had their moments in the series, but they failed to capitalise and ended up losing their grip on the matches; Rizwan admitting his side's death overs problems are continuing to haunt them. Pakistan had New Zealand on the ropes in the first game of the series, only to concede 344 and then lose the plot when they seemed to be on target in the chase. They never recovered in the second game after having New Zealand at 132-5 at one stage, while the chase never got going in the rain-affected final game on Saturday.

Rizwan pointed out that team management and the Pakistan Cricket Board are well aware of the issues but the struggles seem never-ending. It raises questions regarding Pakistan's evolution in modern-day cricket, with the side only giving glimpses of their promise to change their approach. There was some show of 'intent' in the T20 series that preceded the ODIs, but there also Pakistan ended up on the losing end. The loss in New Zealand also likely marks the end of the road for head coach Aaqib Javed, under whom Pakistan recorded ODI series victories against South Africa and Australia but have only gone downhill from there.

It is evident that the team needs fresher ideas and better execution. The PCB, too, hasn't helped with the continuous chopping and changing of the team management. Consistency at the top is a prerequisite for consistency on the field, and the PCB has been doing exactly the opposite. It is high time that the PCB sets things right; even if it demands a complete overhaul of the system as Pakistan seem to be at the risk of becoming the also-rans in world cricket.

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## Balochistan deadlock

THE state's efforts to stifle political activity in Balochistan are unlikely to improve the situation, and instead may further enflame matters. After the authorities placed obstacles in the way of the BNP-M's 'long march', Akhtar Mengal's party has warned that it will march on Quetta today. The Baloch leader had originally launched a long march from Wadh to the provincial capital on March 28, calling for the release of Mahrang Baloch and other detained women activists. However, unable to reach Quetta due to obstructions placed by the state, the party transformed the procession into a protest sit-in. Negotiations with the state have failed to end the impasse, though the provincial government's spokesperson said on Saturday the BNP-M may be allowed to march to Quetta, but not to the red zone. In a related move, the provincial head of the JWP has also been detained. Meanwhile, political parties in Balochistan have called on the state to lift restrictions on political activities in the province.

Peaceful protest is the democratic right of all citizens, and the state should not be creating hindrances in the exercise of this right. In the context of Balochistan, where political expression has been severely curtailed, the need to protect this right is even greater. Rather than trying to stop the protests, the government should ponder over why Balochistan's people have taken to the streets. Akhtar Mengal's demands to release women activists should seriously be considered. What is needed in Balochistan is sagacity and vision, not the colonial-style methods that have been employed for the past several decades, which have failed to address the situation in the province or neutralise the insurgency. Political activity should not be equated with 'political opportunism', and the state needs to make a clear distinction between terrorists and peaceful political activists. Defending the right to assemble and express oneself is not the same as expressing sympathy with terrorists. If the state shuts all avenues of political expression, then the volcano of disaffection in Balochistan is likely to explode with even greater ferocity. That is why Akhtar Mengal and other moderate nationalists and rights activists should be engaged and listened to. The militarised approach may bring temporary quiet to Balochistan, but it will not address the long-standing grievances militants tap into to fuel the insurgency. The state, therefore, must handle the situation with wisdom.

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## Escalating brutality

ISRAEL'S war against Gaza is not a campaign against Hamas — it is a war against a people. The latest ground operations — now targeting densely populated northern neighbourhoods like Shujaiya — are not just military manoeuvres. They are a calculated

exertion of overwhelming force in a territory where civilians have nowhere left to flee. The stated aim is to pressure Hamas into releasing hostages. The consequence, predictably, is mass suffering. The recent airstrike on the Dar al-Arqam school in Gaza City — killing at least 27 civilians, including 14 children — is a grotesque example. Israel insists the building housed a Hamas command post. Even if that were true, the repeated targeting of such civilian infrastructure exposes the hollowness of claims that this war is being waged with precision or restraint. The numbers speak for themselves. More than 50,000 Palestinians have now died in this war, with women and children comprising the majority. A quarter of Gaza's population is displaced yet again. Food, clean water, and medicine remain restricted by Israel's blockade. This is not merely war; it is asphyxiation.

Diplomacy, too, lies in ruins. Hamas rejected Israel's latest offer — a 40-day ceasefire in exchange for the partial release of hostages — demanding a permanent truce and full Israeli withdrawal. Yet it is Israel — the occupying power, the military hegemon — that bears the greater burden to end the carnage. A wider regional war now looms after Israel's assassination of a senior Hamas commander in Lebanon, threatening to shatter its fragile truce with Hezbollah. This cannot go on. The world's patience is running out. Israel must be held accountable under international law, including by the International Criminal Court, for war crimes. A ceasefire is only the beginning; the siege of Gaza must end, and a political solution must follow. Western capitals, long reluctant to criticise Israel, must recognise its actions as collective punishment. History will not look kindly on those who enabled it.

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## Going dry

PAKISTAN is a water-stressed country and tens of millions remain water-insecure, forcing large communities to migrate from across the country to other regions for survival.

The UN report Global Water Security 2023 Assessment placed Pakistan in the “critically water-insecure category”, underscoring the fact that the country is facing an emergency that requires urgent action as per-capita water availability is rapidly declining due to climate change, population growth, mismanagement and wasteful use of the resource.

The lack of investment in water infrastructure means that more and more communities will find it harder to access fresh water over time. The water problem has, in fact, morphed into a very complex political economy issue. Yet, the policymakers try to see it through a technical lens, which stymies efforts to evolve a comprehensive strategy for conservation and optimal use.

Of late, the issue has come under renewed public focus because of the Punjab government's plans to construct new canals to irrigate millions of barren acres in Cholistan. The project has spawned serious concerns in Sindh, where reduction in environmental flow below Kotri has resulted in massive sea intrusion and displacement of a significantly large population living along the delta.

Concurrently, a Lahore High Court judge has taken notice of wastage of fresh water in Punjab's cities. He has ordered the urban planners to declare an emergency, launch a crackdown against housing societies, and evolve strategies for water recycling at the local level. In the meanwhile, a minister has offered full federal government support for timely completion of Wapda's hydropower schemes to increase water storage and generate green electricity.

On the face of it, the schemes for new irrigation channels, water conservation and recycling in the urban areas and investments in water storages do not appear to have any linkage. But they are deeply interconnected issues and call for a well-knitted, integrated policy response, which involves all tiers of government — both vertically and horizontally, consumers, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. Indeed, the initial challenge would be to deal with the related political issues by firmly establishing the water rights of the provinces and public ownership of the resource.

With the frequency of extreme climate change events, like massive floods, droughts, erratic monsoons, etc increasing, Pakistan is running out of time to save its declining water resource to address water equity issues, protect livelihoods and ensure long-term food security. This is a task technocrats and bureaucrats cannot pull off on their own; senior national and provincial politicians would have to step up for long-term resolution of interprovincial frictions before a comprehensive policy response can be drawn up.

Until then, the authorities should refrain from undertaking any water scheme that is seen as an infringement on the rights of any federating unit to avoid more controversies.

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## Afghan return

AS expected, the government of Pakistan is moving ahead with its plan to forcibly repatriate Afghan Citizenship Card holders still residing in the country. It may be recalled that it had earlier announced March 31 as the deadline for 'voluntary repatriation', after which stragglers would be deported. By making good on that warning, Islamabad has chosen to ignore repeated calls from humanitarian organisations — including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, whose representative in Pakistan spoke on Eid to advocate

a more compassionate approach and to give refugees more time to return. This decision is the state's prerogative, and clearly, there's little anyone else can do about it. As the Foreign Office keenly reminded critics of Islamabad's Afghan policy around two weeks earlier, Pakistan is not bound by the Refugee Convention, and everything it has done for Afghan refugees has been done 'out of the goodness of its heart'. Therefore, views like UNHCR Representative Philippa Candler's, who observed that "Over time, Afghan refugees have become woven into the fabric of Pakistan's society," find no currency in Islamabad, where policy hawks have chosen to see Afghans as outsiders and an existential threat.

Now that it has chosen this path, the least the government can do is ensure that all Afghans who are subject to deportation orders are treated humanely and respectfully on their journey back. There is a very strong possibility they will not be, and given their vulnerable status, there are bound to be predators, both state officials and civilians, looking to exploit their situation. The authorities must go out of their way to ensure that deportees' lives, property and dignity are protected and that they are given ample opportunity to set their affairs in order. Many Afghans came to this country empty-handed. During the time they spent here, some of them have managed to scrape a little of their lives back together. The Pakistani state's decision to return them to where they fled must not come across as their punishment for being Afghan. If they are being returned 'home', as the Pakistani authorities like to frame their decision to deport them, then they must be given reason to feel so. The state can be as firm as it needs to be in order to implement its policy, but it must strive not to do anything cruel. That would help no one.

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## Hurting women

MONTH after month, the figures of crimes against women in the country indicate that our society is close to collapsing under the weight of its own disgrace, yet public outrage is absent. For starters, the Sustainable Social Development Organisation's 2024 report, stating that while globally 20pc women face abuse, a shocking 90pc of Pakistan's females endure violence, should have shaken us to the core. But the dire situation of women, despite progressive legislation, has been overlooked by the state. According to a Lahore police performance report for the first quarter of the ongoing year, over a 100 women were subjected to assault in the Punjab capital; the force claims that it arrested 110 suspects involved in attacks on 103 women along with others implicated in 40 cases, including murders of 15 women, and rescued 988 female abductees. As numbers swell in Lahore, data says that out of the 4,641 reported rape cases in Punjab, a dismal 20 resulted in convictions.

It is time for men and women to confront this rampant misogyny. Each statistic is a tragedy with lessons: prejudice, victim-shaming, poor access to justice and the sexist whataboutery by politicians have consolidated misogyny and brutalised society. While robust investigation and policing are crucial, these measures are weakened by the lack of unequivocal commitment to the issue from lawmakers and political parties. Parliamentarians need to use their positions to censure atrocities against women irrespective of class and ideology; maligning a woman for political point-scoring is not politics but perversion. Messaging in educational institutions and in homes across the country to convey that respecting women is a must should also gain momentum. Empathy and unity ensure equality and freedom from rigid chauvinistic structures through stringent enforcement of laws, and higher conviction rates with solid evidence collection. The state has to guarantee a humane environment and a life without violence for its female citizens.

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## Meltdown

PAKISTAN'S stock market has a much better idea than our policymakers about what has actually hit the global economy in the shape of US 'reciprocal' tariffs.

The nation's equity market took a severe drubbing on Monday, plummeting 7.31pc at one point despite a pause in trading triggered by activation of circuit breakers to prevent panic selling and extreme volatility, following a steep drop in stock valuations during the morning session.

Although the PSX managed to claw back some of the losses later in the day, its bearish response to President Donald Trump's tariffs shows that fears of recession worldwide weighed on investors' minds more than the comfort offered by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's optimism that punitive tariffs could be turned into a win-win situation for both countries. "You should never let a good crisis go to waste. We are looking at it both as a challenge as well as an opportunity," the minister said on Saturday.

But, it is one thing to be optimistic and another to be discerning. The minister, and a lot of businesspeople, are hopeful of offering the White House something in the shape of reduced or zero taxes on imports from the US besides boosting purchases from American exporters to get tariff concessions from the Trump administration. They also believe that the country's exporters would gain rather than lose by the US action since its competitors like Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, etc have been slapped with steeper import taxes.

It is not clear how our policymakers and businesspersons plan to gain a bigger market share in the US as we do not produce the high-quality garments and textiles as well as

other products our rivals sell to the US. Nor is it clear how our decision makers plan to meet President Trump's demand from all foreign countries to shrink their trade surpluses with the US. Global market turmoil notwithstanding, America's leader has made it clear that he would not make a deal with other countries unless trade deficits were solved.

It is difficult to say how the situation will unfold in the near future. But it is more or less clear that a full-blown trade war is upon us as the era of the rules-based, multilateral trading order is nearly over. With that we are entering into an arbitrary, protectionist phase where might will be right, which poses a major risk to weaker economies like ours.

The stability and clarity international trade relations had under the WTO framework would no longer be available. Even if we are able to get concessions from the US, it will not protect us from the potential negative impacts of the changes spawned by the rejection of rules-based trading by the world's biggest economy. Optimism is welcome but we should also be clear-eyed and prepared to brace ourselves for the possible shocks to come.

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## Settling differences

SOMETHING is stirring within the PTI. Some of its older hands are back in the limelight, ostensibly to make another attempt at securing a rapprochement with the establishment. Imran Khan is prepared to come to the negotiating table if the establishment is prepared to talk, PTI veteran Azam Khan Swati recently communicated through the media. It is unclear what has changed. Why now, and what different result is being expected? After all, ever since his ouster, Mr Khan has been quite open about his desire to negotiate only with the security establishment. However, though he has been quite clear that he will talk to the generals and no one else, the same sentiment doesn't seem to have been reciprocated by the other side. Several attempts have been made to secure some kind of agreement between the two, but talks have ultimately broken down due to the rigid positions taken by them. What makes the present situation more interesting is how it has triggered unease both within and without the party. The party's cadres are clearly not on the same page, but the PTI's rivals also seem unnaturally enthusiastic about celebrating the party's weaknesses.

Undoubtedly, something is afoot that the masses are not privy to. There have been rumours about an 'international' attempt being made to contain the fallout of the PTI-establishment rift before things turn more toxic. It seems worth pointing out here that recent developments in the US have been suggesting a gathering geopolitical storm along with an international economic crisis. There's also the matter of a Pakistan-specific



legislation that is slowly snaking its way through the American legislative system. An adverse outcome in case it's put to the vote could prove quite embarrassing. Pakistan cannot face any more upheaval with a house divided. Much has been expended to steady the ship since the 2022 political crisis, and it would be folly to squander it all because of a few resolvable differences. If talks can lead to a settlement of Pakistan's political crisis, they should be conducted with all seriousness. However, any 'solution' that is arrived at must not exclude or sideline any of the legitimate stakeholders in Pakistan's political process. This is crucial, because unless there is a broad agreement on the path forward, the country will remain trapped in a cycle of recurring instability.

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## Glacial ingenuity

NECESSITY is indeed the mother of invention, as witnessed in Gilgit-Baltistan. In these areas, where climate change has dramatically reduced snowfall and disrupted traditional water cycles, farmers are not waiting for salvation from the state. Instead, they are building alternatives in the form of shimmering towers of ice. Inspired by the work of environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk, local villagers pipe water from streams, spray it into the frigid air, and let gravity and winter do the rest. These conical towers gradually melt during spring and summer, providing a lifeline to orchards and crops long before the natural glaciers begin to thaw. The 'ice stupas' have already transformed lives; where farmers could plant only once a year, they now sow multiple crops. Entire villages that once waited until June for water are irrigating fields as early as March. More than 20 villages, and over 16,000 people, have benefited — not through billion-rupee megaprojects, but through community willpower and practical knowledge-sharing.

In a country where droughts, floods, and mismanagement are often in the news, it is heartening to witness citizen-led innovation and optimism. The lesson is clear: water conservation is not solely the domain of engineers and ministries. Communities across Pakistan can embrace localised solutions: from rainwater harvesting and drip irrigation to fixing leaks and reducing wastage. Grey-water recycling, rooftop water storage, terraced farming, and school-based awareness programmes can also help promote long-term sustainability. In coastal areas, small-scale desalination units may offer relief. In urban centres, policies encouraging water-efficient appliances and reuse of treated wastewater in parks and construction will have a lasting impact. With temperatures rising and resources thinning, the future of water in Pakistan hangs in the balance. However, the villagers of Kharmang and Skardu remind us that resilience is possible, and that the coldest ideas can bring the warmest hope.



## Following through

THE government's decision to establish the National Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centre (Niftac) under the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) is a positive move — on paper. With violence escalating in KP and Balochistan and the TTP and BLA continuing their campaign of terror, Pakistan cannot afford to delay action. The deadly ambushes on security forces in North Waziristan, targeted attacks in Dera Ismail Khan and Gwadar, and the Jaffar Express hijacking in Balochistan demonstrate the growing sophistication and reach of militant groups.

Nacta's fifth Board of Governors meeting, where Niftac was approved, also laid out plans for Provincial Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centres (Piftacs), a promising attempt to streamline threat analysis across federal and provincial lines. But Nacta has seen hopeful launches before. The Joint Intelligence Directorate approved in 2016 was hailed as a game-changer in intelligence coordination — until it faded into irrelevance. Similarly, past counterterrorism frameworks, including the National Internal Security Policy (2018–23), with its emphasis on non-kinetic measures, were left unimplemented. Now, faced with another wave of militant violence, officials have returned to old plans with renewed urgency.

The situation demands more than bureaucratic reshuffling or new acronyms. Pakistan's CT response has too often consisted of making new bodies, issuing fresh mandates, and calling for coordination — without addressing the root causes of militancy or ensuring continuity in policy execution. If the government truly wishes to fortify the internal security apparatus, it must do more than approve plans. It must execute them in all earnest.

This means empowering Nacta to function as the country's lead civilian CT authority. It also means breaking the cycle of sidelining Nacta after every surge of violence. It means funding and strengthening provincial CT departments to detect and disrupt militant networks before they strike. The ideological dimension of this war must also be tackled. As highlighted in the National Action Plan — the government's central policy document on countering terrorism — long-term peace depends on addressing deep-rooted local grievances in restive areas like Balochistan and the merged districts of KP. Reconciliation, development, and deradicalisation initiatives cannot remain dormant words in a policy document.

As this newspaper argued last year, the state must prioritise reforms in regions that have long suffered from poverty, marginalisation, and security operations devoid of political will. Moreover, extremist and sectarian outfits that still operate in the public sphere must be dismantled. They feed the very ideologies that produce suicide bombers and armed groups. Reviving Nacta is important. But so is recognising that CT is not just about hardware and coordination cells. It is about political resolve, long-term investment in

affected communities, and an unwavering commitment to implement what has already been promised. The question is whether this government, like others before it, will once again stop short of following through.

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## Robe rebellion

THE unrest within the Islamabad High Court shows no sign of abating, and it is perhaps just as well that the petition filed by five of its judges questioning the court's seniority list and its acting chief justice's appointment has been fixed for hearing before the Constitutional Bench in the coming week. In recent days, several IHC judges have expressed concern over the acting chief justice of the court transferring cases from one bench to another "without clear legal justification". The issue first came to the fore last month, when one of the IHC justices, after discovering they had been reassigned a case they had previously recused from, challenged the acting chief justice's intervention in returning the case to their bench. On Monday, a similar situation arose when a division bench of the IHC discovered that it had been assigned three blasphemy cases previously heard by another bench. "This case has already been heard in detail by a single bench. It is not appropriate to transfer it to another bench without any justification," one of the judges remarked on the occasion. The concern was reportedly endorsed by the counsel of the parties present as well.

The IHC has been in the limelight ever since three judges from other high courts were transferred to the court in controversial circumstances. Later, one of those three was also elevated as its acting chief justice, superseding several judges who had been serving at the court for years. Five of the IHC 'older' judges subsequently petitioned the Supreme Court challenging the transfer, the changes made to the court's seniority list, as well as the appointment of the IHC's acting chief justice. Separately, the Karachi Bar Association also petitioned the court questioning why the transferred judges were immediately given senior positions in the IHC and arguing that their transfers were never made in the public interest but in order to punish certain judges of the IHC and disrupt the court's functioning. As the Constitutional Bench prepares to hear their arguments, it bears pointing out that it is crucial that this controversy is settled expeditiously and in line with prevailing rules, regulations and the law. The questions being raised about the IHC's functioning from within are tarnishing its credibility. There must be justice within the judiciary, otherwise public faith in its impartiality will continue to dwindle.

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## Fearing birth

AMID dramatic aid cuts, the WHO has sounded the alarm about the dangers to Pakistan's mothers and newborns, asking global and national associates to help lower its maternal and neonatal mortalities without delay. To prevent another bleak phase — in 2020, a UN progress report said that Pakistan ranked third among the top 10 nations with the highest maternal and newborn deaths and stillbirths — the government must pay close attention to WHO's depressing data: 675 under one-month-old babies and 27 mothers succumb to preventable complications daily in the country, amounting to an annual loss of more than 9,800 mothers and 246,300 newborns with over 190,000 stillbirths every year. We can, however, take credit for the fact that 80pc of our population resides in areas where neonatal tetanus spread has been contained. While the Trends in Maternal Mortality report states that maternal deaths between 2000 and 2023 fell by 40pc due to easier access to health facilities, it also warns against a relapse — approximately 260,000 women died in 2023, which means one expectant mother perished every two minutes.

This nation cannot relive another nightmare. If authorities slacken, health gains diminish. This jeopardises global goals to reduce maternal mortality, putting over a million females at risk by 2030. The challenges in the provision of obstetric care within health units are prime concerns as haemorrhages and deficiencies are common causes of deaths. But most obstetric services are concentrated in urban areas, with not enough focus on underdeveloped regions. There is a need for investment in quality infrastructure and staff to handle labour problems and deliver superior neonatal care. The government, aside from healthcare reforms, must develop training programmes in partnership with health specialists that focus on the untrained midwives who perform rural deliveries, with large-scale distribution of medical supplies to ensure safety. In short, the blood of mothers dying in childbirth must not darken our prospects again.

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## Crypto coup

IT is quite the coup. One of the most recognisable names in the global cryptocurrency market has been roped in by the finance ministry to serve as 'strategic adviser' to the Pakistan Crypto Council, established to oversee and promote wider adoption of blockchain technology and digital assets within the country. Changpeng Zhao, or CZ as he is commonly known, is not only one of the richest persons in the world, thanks to early investments in cryptocurrencies, he is also the co-founder of popular trading platform Binance, the largest cryptocurrency trading exchange by volume in the world today. Mr Zhao is also intimately aware of the legal issues surrounding the crypto trade, thanks to

his experiences as former CEO of Binance. That makes him a valuable ally for policymakers in Pakistan, who are gearing to go big on crypto and related technologies. “With Zhao onboard, we are accelerating our vision to make Pakistan a regional powerhouse for Web3, digital finance, and blockchain-driven growth,” the finance minister said.

There is no doubt that Mr Zhao’s onboarding will invite the right kind of interest from around the world. However, it is also hoped that his opinions and advice will be given careful consideration. After all, regulators worldwide have been quite suspicious of the crypto trade, and for many good reasons. Even in Pakistan, Binance had, till recently, been operating in a regulatory grey area, with the State Bank discouraging citizens from engaging in crypto trading and refusing to provide assistance in case they encountered fraudulent activity. Local investors will obviously feel much more confident knowing that the founder of Binance is now on board, but the aim should be to look at the bigger picture. Pakistan can emerge as a hub for future growth and innovation in these technologies if it plays its cards right. But to do that, it must overcome many regulatory challenges and limitations.

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## Senate shortfalls

THE latest Citizens’ Report by Pildat on the performance of the Senate of Pakistan is a sobering account of parliamentary dysfunction during the 2024-25 legislative year. While the upper house met its constitutional requirement by holding 65 sittings and in that time passing 51 bills, the report reveals troubling signs of procedural decay, declining productivity, and executive overreach. The executive’s growing reliance on ordinances stands out as the most disturbing trend. Sixteen ordinances were laid before the Senate — a 1,500pc increase from the previous year — effectively bypassing debate and oversight. These were introduced even as private members’ legislative output declined by 63.8pc, a clear indicator of shrinking space for independent or opposition voices. Meanwhile, the passage of the controversial 26th Constitutional Amendment — marred by reports of coerced absences and disputed votes — further eroded confidence in the chamber’s integrity. Operationally, while the Senate increased its sittings, total working hours fell by over 20pc, making 2024-25 the least productive year in six years. Quorum issues persisted, with 16 sittings adjourned due to low attendance. The Leader of the House, Senator Ishaq Dar, attended just 28pc of sessions, the lowest in recent history. In contrast, the Leader of the Opposition, Senator Shibli Faraz, recorded 80pc attendance and emerged as the most vocal senator. Financial accountability also faltered. The

Senate's total budget rose by 43.3pc to over Rs7bn, with per-member expenditure climbing to Rs85.2m — a 68.5pc spike from the previous year.

A particularly alarming concern is the continued absence of representation for KP. Eleven Senate seats from the province remain vacant due to a standoff between the PTI-led provincial government and federal authorities over oath-taking on reserved seats. The Election Commission's allocation of these seats to opposition parties was rejected by the KP government, which refused to administer oaths, resulting in indefinite delays to the elections. To restore credibility, Pildat has urged reforms on multiple fronts: reducing the use of ordinances, ensuring timely filling of vacant seats, improving attendance of key officeholders, enforcing quorum rules, and strengthening the role of Senate committees in legislative oversight. What is at stake is more than legislative efficiency; it is the health of the democratic process itself. If these recommendations are ignored, the Senate risks sliding into irrelevance.

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## Mineral wealth

THE participation of 300 delegates, including guests from overseas, in the two-day mineral summit in Islamabad has renewed hopes of growing foreign interest in Pakistan's mineral sector, which remains mostly unexplored due to lack of financing and access to technology. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has highlighted mineral resources as the lynchpin of the nation's economic revival. Addressing the Pakistan Minerals Investment Forum, he went on to state that the country's mineral wealth 'worth trillions of dollars' could free its economy from perpetual dependency on frequent bailouts from global lenders.

Indeed, the recent announcement at the forum of new, significant discoveries of hydrocarbons in KP and gold-copper deposits in Balochistan underscores the presence of vast reserves of natural resources in the country waiting to be tapped. However, the conversion of these deposits into mines will not happen overnight in spite of a discernible international interest in the country's mineral sector due to the new discoveries and the settlement of the Reko Diq dispute leading to its revival. Investors would want to first carry out studies to determine the size of the deposits and economic viability of undertaking exploration before committing funds rather than relying on the optimistic estimates of Pakistan's government.

The policymakers must also avoid rushing into flawed agreements just to woo investment in this critical sector. The agreements should be transparent and based on assessment of the true value of the deposits. If the country is to truly benefit from its mineral wealth, it

is also crucial to ensure that the policy and subsequent contracts under it cover the entire minerals' value chain: the extraction of minerals to local processing and refining for production of the finished products for export. We have seen the investors take out minerals from Saindak in raw form, with virtually little to no benefit to the country. The Reko Diq dispute also had its genesis in such a defective agreement. While the renewed focus on the mineral sector is welcome, we should not forget the reality that this wealth is found in the two provinces reeling under growing militancy and insurgency. Though the army chief promised the forum participants robust security for investors, practical measures need to be taken to allay their concerns in Balochistan. Moreover, it must be ensured that the people of Balochistan and KP have first priority in jobs, and that the proceeds from these projects are spent on the welfare of the people. The Baloch unrest is partly the result of the belief that the province's resources are being used for the rest of the country rather than for Balochistan's economic development. This perception will not go away unless the financial benefits accruing from these projects are directed for the development of the province and its population.

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## Balochistan outreach

THE problems of Balochistan are “political and must be resolved through political means”.

This view, espoused by PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif during a recent meeting with National Party chief and former Balochistan chief minister Dr Abdul Malik Baloch in Lahore, is shared by many in Pakistan who wish to see a peaceful and just resolution to the troubled province's crises. And coming from the leader of a party which currently heads the federal government, while also representing Pakistan's politically most powerful province, makes the statement more relevant.

Some observe — and not without reason — that the civilian leadership has little actual say in the state's Balochistan policy. That is why it is even more important for politicians to assert themselves and speak up at this critical time in favour of a political solution for Balochistan.

The elder Sharif also reportedly said that he would speak to the prime minister as well as “other relevant authorities” to help resolve the Balochistan imbroglio. The fact is that it is actually the ‘other authorities’, particularly those in Rawalpindi, that need to be convinced by the political elite that the troubled province's issues cannot be resolved militarily alone, and that without meaningful political engagement the insurgency cannot be defeated.



The fact that Mr Nawaz Sharif has become involved is also relevant as he was on good political terms with former Balochistan chief minister Sardar Ataullah Mengal, whose son Akhtar Mengal is currently camped outside Quetta in protest, calling for the release of political prisoners. Though the establishment may have the upper hand in the current set-up, Mr Sharif can use his influence to persuade it to let the politicians take the lead in resolving Balochistan's conundrum. In fact, all mainstream parties must unite over this existential matter and initiate a process of reconciliation and dialogue in the province.

Dr Malik Baloch's efforts must also be encouraged: unless the administration engages with credible politicians such as the NP leader, Mr Mengal and other moderate nationalists, the last remaining link between those in the province that believe in the constitutional process and the state will eventually break. This would give extremist elements and separatists a fillip, spelling immense trouble for the federation.

The window for a peaceful settlement to the Balochistan problem may close soon. The state needs to show magnanimity and vision. It can start by releasing all political prisoners and removing obstacles in the way of political activity in the province. Terrorists must be dealt with firmly. But engaging in political activity cannot be equated with terrorism. These CBMs can pave the way for a dialogue on ensuring Balochistan's constitutional and economic rights, and ushering in representative political rule. The clock is ticking.

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## PSL season

THE build-up to the 10th season of the Pakistan Super League, cricket's most lucrative product in the country, has hardly been ideal.

This season marks a decade since the inception of the league that had earlier been transformational for the sport in Pakistan. But it begins today amid concerns that cricket in the country has touched an all-time low, with the national team consistently underperforming and a war of words raging between franchise owners over the PSL's standing.

Pakistan have been struggling internationally for several months now — be it at the Champions Trophy they hosted or the New Zealand series, which ended with skipper Mohammad Rizwan stating that the players would try to do better in the PSL.

However, the PSL — once Pakistan's springboard to success at the international level, and a platform for budding players who would go on to become the national team's stars — is no longer the same competition it was in its earlier iterations.



It also does not have international players of the same calibre as before, thanks largely to the fact that it runs at the same time as the Indian Premier League. It has meant that PSL sides will make do with international players not picked in the IPL draft, former Australian opener David Warner among them. The mood has also been dampened due to Pakistan's own star names floundering at recent international matches.

Furthermore, there are doubts over the PSL's overall standing. Multan Sultans owner Ali Tareen questioned the claim of the Pakistan Cricket Board that the upcoming season of the PSL would be the biggest, stating it was more of the same. It prompted a strong rebuke from his Karachi Kings counterpart Salman Iqbal before Mr Tareen clarified he was worried about the league's stagnation. He spoke about the need to make it an international brand, but it is evident with the PSL's scheduling this season that it is not drawing global attention as it runs in the shadow of the IPL.

That should not, however, in any way diminish its status as Pakistan's most entertaining sports product, one that paved the way for the return of international cricket to the country. The current season, though, should pave the way to make the PSL bigger and better.

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## Student woes

BRIGHT young Pakistanis face an uncertain future in the US. The Trump administration, not content with merely terrorising foreign students with visa revocations and deportations for expressing criticism of Israel and its genocidal campaign in Palestine, has also taken an axe to academic exchange and scholarship programmes that had for ages made America an aspirational higher education destination for the Pakistani intelligentsia. According to recent reports, the United States Educational Foundation in Pakistan has formally shut down the 15-year-old Global Undergraduate Exchange Programme for Pakistan. The future of its Fulbright Programme is also in doubt, owing to an extended funding freeze imposed by the new administration in February. Students already in America on Fulbright scholarships have not been receiving their stipends owing to the same funding 'pause', which has likely made it difficult, if not impossible, for many to continue living and studying in that country. They will find themselves in limbo if Washington decides to pull the plug.

It is, of course, up to the US government to spend its money however it sees fit. It would have been better, obviously, if it allowed foreign students already enrolled in American universities to complete their education without placing an unanticipated financial burden on them. But such decency seems to be in short supply in these troubled times. Exceptional Pakistani students hoping to study abroad should not lose heart, though.

There are many excellent universities in other countries where students can still pursue their academic goals while contributing positively to their host countries and institutions. Many of them offer generous scholarships to Pakistani students. It is also hoped that other countries will fill the void being created by the Trump administration. Young Pakistanis have repeatedly proven that they possess some of the brightest minds in the world. Inviting them to study will nurture a lasting relationship with Pakistan's future generations and shape their worldview in positive directions.

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## Stranded Afghans

WESTERN countries have been quite cruel to the Afghan people. Not only did they lay waste to the latter's homeland over a war that ultimately went nowhere, but they are also failing to take responsibility for the lives they placed at risk during the process of attempting to 'rebuild' Afghanistan.

This, of course, is a reference to the many Afghans awaiting their promised repatriation to various Western countries. They have been stranded for years in Pakistan because states that once promised them asylum in recognition of their sacrifices and contributions have been taking their sweet time processing their visa applications.

These refugees face certain risks to their lives and liberty if they return to Afghanistan: their past work for various Western governments and organisations has seen them branded as 'traitors' in their country. Those risks have increased considerably of late, as Pakistan has adopted a 'no concessions' policy towards Afghan nationals.

It is deeply disappointing that the countries responsible for these refugees' plight have not shown more urgency in addressing their condition. One wonders if there is any concern about the message being sent by their complacency. They seem to be telling the Afghan people that, no matter where they stood during the so-called war on terror, they were, ultimately, dispensable to Western nations.

One wonders what the Afghans make of their situation: after all, the forces that went into Afghanistan presented themselves as more 'moral', more 'civilised' and more concerned with 'human rights' than the 'barbarians' they meant to defeat. Once their long campaign fizzled out though, it seemed only those Afghans who had kept their distance, or those who sided with the 'enemy', were the ones who came out on top. The rest had to flee for their lives and seek the charity of other nations.

The countries who pledged their support to them must do better. Pakistan has already made it clear that it is no longer hospitable to Afghan nationals. Though Islamabad must

show more flexibility towards refugees who face risks to life and liberty in case of deportation, the other nations responsible for their well-being should also be pushed to step up and expedite their repatriation.

The Afghan people cannot be treated like a football that is kicked around while nations bicker over visa protocols and policies. They deserve safety, stability and a chance to rebuild their lives.

It is both unfair and dangerous that the Afghan people's immediate well-being has been left entirely to Pakistan to consider, while other nations have been taking years figuring out whether or not they will do right by those whom they promised safety and security. Whatever their concerns, they can be addressed once these refugees are relocated to less hostile locations.

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## Peaceful protest

A CONCLAVE of local divines that had gathered in Islamabad on Thursday have made two important points: firstly, that all protests and boycotts in support of the besieged Palestinians should remain peaceful, and secondly, that the Muslim world should take collective action to stop the genocide in Gaza. Mufti Taqi Usmani observed that “do protest and boycott, but peacefully”. This message is important because over the past few days, mobs have attacked several Western fast-food outlets in Lahore as well as Karachi and other Sindh towns, apparently due to the perception that these brands ‘support’ Israel. However, vandalism is not the way to express solidarity with Palestine. It is a fact that many MNCs — including Big Tech firms — have financially and otherwise supported Israel. But violent attacks on foreign brands in Pakistan will hardly end the genocide. Instead, a more intelligent way for those looking to stand with Palestine would be to follow the guidelines of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Rather than randomly boycotting firms believed to be aiding Israel, BDS targets those companies with “a record of complicity in Israeli apartheid”. This can include firms involved in illegal Israeli settlements, or those that have made donations to Tel Aviv's military. The boycott of apartheid South Africa worked, and conscientious people worldwide should also shun Israel and its allies until the genocide in the occupied territories is permanently halted.

As for the other point made by the clerics, sadly, the Muslim world has done very little of substance to stop the massacre in Gaza, allowing Israel to ramp up its campaign of extermination in the Strip, and also attacking Syria and Lebanon. Calls for unity are important, but the Muslim world is characterised by intense internal division, and the lack of a cohesive policy to stop the war on the Palestinian people. The sad fact is that Muslim-

majority countries have been unable to leverage their collective economic and political clout. Other than making sympathetic statements, the OIC has not been able to enforce a trade blockade against Israel, while Muslim states that have diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv have not felt it necessary to break off ties until the bloodshed in Gaza stops. Israel knows how weak and divided the Muslim world is, hence it sees no reason to stop the murder.

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## Squash hopes

IT was a monumental triumph: Noor Zaman came back from the brink to clinch the Under-23 World Squash Championships title, and in the process, revitalised hopes for the sport in Pakistan. This was the first time the World Squash Federation, the game's global governing body, held an event for the age group. Noor's 3-2 victory against Karim El Torkey gave the tournament hosts — holding a world championship for the first time in 20 years — a lot to celebrate. The grandson of squash great Qamar Zaman, Noor's win qualifies him for this year's PSA World Championships — the sport's elite tournament. Alongside Hamza Khan, who ended Pakistan's 37-year wait for the World Junior Squash Championship in 2023, Noor is part of Pakistan's next generation of promising talent. Not since Jansher Khan triumphed in 1996 has Pakistan seen a world champion; but with Noor, Hamza and Mohammad Ammad — who won the consolation final at the Under-23 championships — there is genuine hope for the drought to end. But how to make that hope a reality? The onus falls on the Pakistan Squash Federation to help the players reach their full potential. In the past several decades, Pakistan has seen many talents fall by the wayside. But the emergence of the current crop presents Pakistan with a new opportunity to return to the top. Opportunities and support for these players should not be lacking at any level.

Due attention also needs to be paid to the women's game in the country. The Under-23 Championships also provided Pakistan its first-ever women's tournament where Amna Fayyaz grabbed a silver medal after her loss in the consolation final. With better training and more exposure, Pakistan's players will do well. Noor's win is a timely boost for the country ahead of the 2028 Olympics, where squash will feature for the first time. It is a great opportunity for Pakistan, once undisputed kings of world squash, and they should not squander it.

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## Targeting dissent

THE recent notice sent by the FIA to former senator Farhatullah Babar is deeply troubling — and revealing. Ostensibly based on a private citizen's complaint alleging corruption and misuse of office, the inquiry appears designed less to establish facts than to intimidate a long-standing critic of state overreach. That Mr Babar has not held any public office in over a decade — and served only in an honorary capacity during his last political assignment — raises serious questions about the nature of the complaint itself. The FIA acted with unseemly haste, summoning him just before the Eid holidays, without even sharing a copy of the complaint or supporting documentation. Mr Babar's public record speaks for itself. As a legislator, he championed progressive laws and human rights causes, which ranged from missing persons to transparency in state institutions. Even in retirement, he has remained an active voice for the voiceless — from supporting marginalised groups to demanding greater clarity on the mandate of intelligence agencies. His recent use of the Right to Information law to probe sensitive areas of governance may well explain why the state seems uncomfortable with his persistence and moral clarity.

It is regrettable that rather than engage with the legitimate issues he raises, the state appears to be resorting to coercive tactics to silence him. The HRCP has rightly termed the move “a dangerous precedent” — one that undermines the credibility of institutions and signals a continued intolerance for dissenting views. In any democracy, criticism of the state should not be met with reprisal, but with reflection and reform. The FIA's actions will only further the perception that accountability mechanisms are selectively employed, targeting those who dare to speak out. If the state still wishes to be seen as democratic, it must cease and desist from this example of lawfare. It must stop stifling voices like Mr Babar's and instead, listen to them.

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## Spirit of giving

THE recent declaration by ulema affirming that organ donation after death is not only permissible but an act of sadaqah-i-jariyah (ongoing charity) marks a turning point for Pakistan. This clear endorsement should finally dispel religious misconceptions that have hindered a life-saving practice. For too long, Pakistan has lagged behind other Muslim-majority nations in organ donation rates, with tragic consequences. Every year, tens of thousands of Pakistanis die from end-stage organ failure while waiting for transplants that never come. Now, with the support of scholars and medical experts, the foundation for change has been laid. The government must seize the moment to launch a mass

awareness campaign which stresses that organ donation represents the highest form of human generosity — the gift of life itself. It must address family concerns directly, as even when individuals wish to donate, relatives often refuse consent, believing it ‘desecrates’ the body. It should also highlight stories like that of Uzair bin Yasin, whose posthumous donation saved seven lives.

Healthcare providers can play a vital role. Doctors must educate patients about organ donation during routine care, initiating conversations that normalise this practice. Medical institutions should develop simplified registration systems for willing donors and establish clear, transparent protocols that inspire public trust. At the state level, Pakistan must invest in the technical infrastructure necessary for effective organ transplantation. This includes well-equipped facilities capable of harvesting organs within the crucial three to four hours after brain death, improved preservation techniques, and transparent allocation systems that ensure organs go to recipients based solely on medical need and compatibility, not wealth or influence. Such equity is essential to building public trust in the system. Religious leaders across all sects must continue to reinforce their support, framing organ donation as an ultimate expression of Islamic values of compassion and charity. Public figures should lead by example, openly declaring their intention to donate. The ulema’s endorsement has set the wheels in motion. With concerted efforts, Pakistan can foster a culture where organ donation is recognised not as a violation of dignity, but as its ultimate affirmation — allowing one life’s end to bring healing and hope to others. This would truly embody the spirit where the saving of one life is equivalent to the saving of all humanity.

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## Caught in between

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has blinked but refuses to surrender.

The markets that forced him to temporarily freeze higher ‘liberation day’ tariffs but leave the universal 10pc levy in place continue to fret over potential outcomes of his trade war. The dollar has slid, and investors are fleeing the US government bond market, once considered the safest bet in troubled times. The Fed has warned that Mr Trump’s trade policy will keep inflation in the US higher this year, even if it is difficult to predict how the economy will reshape itself afterwards.

Yet Mr Trump warns that higher tariffs will be back if he does not get what he wants from the 75 countries now willing to reset the terms of bilateral trade with America to avoid punitive levies. China, the primary US target of import levies, has reacted aggressively,

raising levies on American goods to 125pc. Hours earlier, it had released a white paper on the US tariff war on its goods, saying America will reap what it sows.

However, the US will not be alone in this harvest. Caught in the trade war between the two economic giants are developing countries like Pakistan, which was slotted for a 29pc increase in the levy on its exports to the US. For starters, the pause is only for 90 days. So, one does not know whether Mr Trump will withdraw the higher tariffs or we will secure a deal equal to or better than what our competitors strike.

Even if the US removes the higher import taxes, chances are that the baseline levy will stay — a significant tariff to bear for troubled economies like Pakistan, which ship many of their goods to the US. This raises the question of what Islamabad can offer to the single largest buyer of its goods — after the EU — in terms of tariff reductions.

In the absence of a trade agreement, under WTO rules, Pakistan cannot reduce duty rates for the US without doing the same for other countries. Then, the main objective of reciprocal tariffs for the US is to balance trade deficits with others, meaning that Pakistan would need to displace imports from other countries with US goods worth about \$3.3bn or decrease its exports to the US. Is this even possible?

More crucially, China is likely to aggressively displace the exports of other countries to Europe and Britain, which will hit us hard due to the cost differential. Although some analysts argue that the falling global oil prices may make up for the potential loss of export revenues in the event of a global recession, America's demand reduction due to higher prices, and aggressive Chinese marketing in our traditional markets, well-functioning economies should not strategise their economic future on the basis of hope alone.

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## April heat

ANOTHER round of climate-induced misery is upon us. The Met Office predicted last Friday that this week would be a sweltering one, with a heatwave sweeping over the country till the coming weekend. It said that a high-pressure system was likely to grip the upper atmosphere from Sunday, triggering heatwave conditions in most parts of the country, which would get more severe in the southern half from April 14. It expected daytime temperatures to remain 6°C to 8°C above normal in Sindh, southern Punjab and Balochistan from Monday to Friday. Meanwhile, the upper half of the country would stew in temperatures four to six degrees higher than usual. Hot nights, dust storms and windstorms also featured in the forecast. It made for a rather sobering prognosis, with an acute shortage of water in the Tarbela and Mangla dams adding to the worries.



Large parts of Pakistan's key agricultural regions have already been facing drought-like conditions, with rainfall drastically below average in the first quarter of 2025. Now adding to that is the extreme heat, which will create major problems for farmers.

These unnatural climate conditions are a sign of how fast the reality is changing for Pakistan, where policymakers still do not appear to be acting very decisively to protect the people and secure their future. While competing claims are being made on its already stressed water resources, the larger picture points to the fact that a much broader and more cohesive plan is needed to meet Pakistan's changing requirements amidst an accelerating climate crisis. Yet, we continue to rely on band-aid measures.

Consider the Met Office's warning to farmers. Based on its prediction, it advised agriculturalists to manage their activities keeping in view weather conditions and to protect their livestock during the heatwave. But such warnings serve no long-term purpose. Given the recurrence of freak weather patterns, perhaps what is needed is continuing farmer re-education and training programmes aimed at climate adaptation. Pakistan must confront the fact that the farm practices in vogue in large parts of the country may have been rendered outdated by climate change. It must move quickly to find ways to mitigate the climate's effects on national output.

Likewise, the issue of water scarcity needs urgent attention. Both climate scientists and experts have long warned that Pakistan cannot continue wasting this vital resource and treating it as if it will stay constant. With reservoirs depleted to critical levels, Pakistan remains at the mercy of nature. An extended drought could trigger disaster in the coming months. There is, therefore, an urgent need to educate the public about water conservation and impress upon it the seriousness of the situation. This is an existential crisis and should be treated as such.

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## ADB's advice

WITH the Trump administration's trade war on China and the rest of the world having led to global economic uncertainty, the Asian Development Bank's advice for Pakistan's policymakers to stick to the reforms agenda agreed with the IMF comes at the right time. Reminding our policymakers of the several downside risks to the country's hard-won but fragile economic recovery, the lender has projected that the national economy will expand at the much slower pace of 2.5pc during this fiscal year compared to the average South Asian growth rate of 6pc. How Donald Trump's trade war will impact these growth estimates if protectionist US policies push the global economy towards recession is anybody's guess. The report has not taken into account the ramifications of the insanely

high American ‘reciprocal import levies’ in its projections. But both the IMF and State Bank have highlighted lately the uncertain global environment as a risk to the country’s struggle to overcome its economic crisis.

That debt-ridden Pakistan faces several vulnerabilities despite its improved external position and a quicker-than-anticipated drop in inflation shows that the country must stay on the path of structural reforms, even more so after the punitive baseline and higher tariffs slammed by the US on most of the world. In its latest Asian Development Outlook report, the lender noted that recovery requires policy consistency and reform implementation to sustain it, build resilience and enable durable growth. Macro improvements, it warns, must not lead to a relaxation of policies and deviation from the reforms path, which could potentially trigger new balance-of-payments pressures, and jeopardise our hard-earned stability and disbursements from multilateral and bilateral partners. The potential negative impact of the Trump tariffs on the global economy will likely spill over into Pakistan too, especially if the tariff war between the US and China does not end soon. The emerging global landscape demands that Pakistan navigate this challenge carefully because of its reliance on both the US and China. With major economic challenges facing the country amid rising militancy, it is crucial for politicians to work out a formula to resolve their selfish disputes and join forces to deal with the emerging situation. The ongoing economic slowdown has affected the average Pakistanis the most in recent years. They deserve better days now.

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## ‘Land of the free’

IN Trumpian America, even those foreigners with legal status are finding that the walls are closing in on them. As part of regulations linked to an imaginatively titled presidential executive order — ‘Protecting the American People Against Invasion’ — signed in January, non-citizens in the US will now be required to register and carry proof of registration at all times. Permanent residents — those with the coveted Green Card — visitors, students and workers, with few exceptions, will be affected by the changes, and even a routine traffic check may result in law enforcers asking foreigners for proof of registration. Registration has been a legal requirement in the US since 1940; what is different with President Donald Trump’s regulations is that foreigners will now be required to carry their papers at all times, or risk fines, even incarceration. For any foreigner who has travelled to the US, these are disturbing changes; legal visitors could earlier feel at ease in the country, without the fear of being hauled up by law enforcement and asked for their papers. But these are very different times.

Historically, America has had its periods of authoritarianism, especially when descendants of immigrants and people of colour have been targeted in xenophobic fits of rage by the state. The starkest example is of the Nisei, or second-generation Japanese-Americans, who were rounded up and placed in camps during World War II. However, in the decades since, the US had come a long way, attracting talent and brains from around the world to help power its economy. Those days are over. As for the Maga crowd, all of America's ills are to be blamed on foreigners, and xenophobic policies are needed to restore the country's 'greatness'. Such moves will ultimately hurt America, as the world's best minds and most industrious people will now think twice about wanting to live or work in the US.

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## Iran slayings

THE brutal killings of eight Pakistani workers in Iran on Saturday underscore the need for both countries to cooperate in the field of counterterrorism, and defeat common enemies determined to sour relations.

The atrocity took place in a town in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, which borders Pakistan, in a region known for its volatility on both sides. All the victims, who worked at a motor workshop, hailed from the Bahawalpur area, and were reportedly killed execution-style.

Two groups representing very different strands of terrorism claimed to have carried out this grisly crime: the Balochistan National/Nationalist Army and Jaish al-Adl. The former is a Baloch separatist group that has remained largely inactive in the recent past, while the latter is an avatar of Jundullah, an Iranian Baloch group with religious leanings. The BNA has in the past been involved in terrorist activity inside Pakistan, while Jaish al-Adl usually targets Iranian security forces.

The last such attack occurred in October 2024, killing at least 10 Iranian border guards near the Pakistani frontier. Meanwhile, workers from Punjab were also murdered by terrorists in Sistan-Baluchestan in January 2024. State authorities on both sides must investigate the latest attack, while Tehran should locate the perpetrators and bring them to justice. It should also ensure that Pakistanis working in Iran are provided with adequate security.

The gruesome crime mirrors several such attacks in Balochistan, in which terrorists have murdered innocent people based on their ethnic origin. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has called upon Iran to hand out exemplary punishment to those involved, while the Iranian foreign ministry has promised to "spare no effort" to get to the culprits. With regard

to who may actually be behind this atrocious crime, the Iranian ambassador to Pakistan has said “traitorous elements, in collaboration with international terrorism” are involved. Further clarity is needed to determine who exactly these elements are.

The fact is that both Pakistan and Iran face common enemies in the shape of non-state actors involved in terrorism. The prime minister has also highlighted this matter. That is why it is important for both to strengthen CT cooperation, and ensure that their respective territories are not used against each other. These malign actors must not be allowed to target innocent people, and damage bilateral ties. Security should particularly be beefed up in the border areas to prevent militant groups and criminal gangs from exploiting ungoverned spaces and remote locations.

It is well known that some hostile foreign actors may be looking to fuel unrest in the Pakistan-Iran border region by encouraging proxies to carry out acts of terrorism. That is why the governments of both states need to remain alert and jointly thwart such nefarious plans.

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## AI in the courts

SUPREME Court Justices Aqeel Ahmed Abbasi and Mansoor Ali Shah’s judgment on the use of AI in the judiciary landed last week as a pleasant surprise. In their judgement, the honourable justices have reasoned that AI ought to be “welcomed with careful optimism” as a solution to the many issues plaguing the Pakistani judiciary. The judgement in question, authored by Justice Shah, notes at one point: “There is an urgent need to examine the systemic causes of [...] delays [in the dispensation of justice] and to devise innovative court and case management systems, particularly at the level of the district judiciary, where the bulk of such disputes originate and where the pressure of case pendency is most acutely felt.” It is in these areas, the judges believe, that AI can be of good use to the judiciary, with the judgement noting that AI could offer a “promising path to operational reform, provided its adoption remains grounded in principled constitutional limits”. While optimistic, the judgement also cautions in detail against overreliance on AI, indicating that it was arrived at after serious and careful deliberation. Such a positive approach to improvement and innovation should always be welcomed.

Other components of the state would do well to follow the Supreme Court. AI is often talked about as the next big disruption after the Industrial Revolution. Where the latter led to the mechanisation of manual labour, AI promises to automate cognitive labour; the Industrial Revolution resulted in economies shifting from agrarian to industrial, while AI is expected to catalyse the transition from industrial to digital or knowledge-based

economies. The Supreme Court, at least, sees the immense potential in AI. Other branches of the Pakistani state should also start considering the dividends of an AI-led upgrade. For now, AI seems to be just another buzzword for our policymakers — there is as yet no indication that they have a comprehensive strategy for leveraging this technology to adapt quickly to an already fast-changing world. But strategic and progressive implementation could help Pakistan make huge leaps forward. In particular, AI can help the state cut red tape, overcome dysfunction, and greatly improve service delivery. If, however, Pakistan misses this boat, the country risks being left further behind the rest of the world. More progressive voices are needed in the corridors of state power.

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## Refusal crisis

PAKISTAN'S polio case count, with 105 days of the year lapsed so far, is in the single digits. But the question is: for how long? Environmental surveillance has detected poliovirus in sewage samples from 20 districts signalling that transmission persists across both urban and rural settings. The virus continues to circulate silently in communities where immunisation coverage remains uneven. That even Karachi — with its size, connectivity and relatively better health infrastructure — is witnessing a surge in vaccine refusals speaks volumes about the scale of the challenge. According to Federal Health Minister Mustafa Kamal, as much as 85pc of all reported polio vaccine refusals in the country are concentrated in the city. Conspiracy theories about infertility, non-halal ingredients, and foreign agendas continue to circulate, particularly among Pakhtun and Urdu-speaking communities. Many households remain sceptical of state-run health campaigns and perceive them as selective interventions rather than genuine care. Gender dynamics also play a role, with women often requiring permission from male family members to vaccinate their children.

Operational missteps add to the challenge. The introduction of new methods — such as needle-free jet injectors — has, in some cases, sparked confusion and fear among parents unfamiliar with these technologies. Without prior sensitisation or explanation, such changes have fuelled further scepticism and inadvertently contributed to higher refusal rates. While officials have rightly reiterated that the oral polio vaccine is safe and essential, the message fails to resonate in communities where trust in the state is low and communication poorly tailored. Threats of legal penalties will only deepen resistance. The upcoming April 21 campaign offers a critical opportunity. The state must move beyond top-down directives and foster community-led engagement. Religious leaders, elders, and teachers must be enlisted to build trust and dispel myths. The state must win the confidence of its people — one conversation, one household, and one drop at a time.

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## A positive start

FROM American threats of bombing Iran, things have taken a more positive turn as President Donald Trump's emissary Steve Witkoff initiated indirect talks on the nuclear issue with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in Muscat on Saturday. While the Omanis acted as intermediaries, Mr Witkoff and Mr Araghchi also met briefly, initiating diplomatic first contact after a lengthy pause. Both sides have cautiously welcomed the developments, and the next round will take place this coming weekend. While Mr Trump has not ruled out attacking Iran in case negotiations fail, the parleys signal a welcome shift from the earlier bombast coming out of Washington, which seemed to indicate that war was imminent.

While the developments are no doubt positive, no one should be under the illusion that the US-Iran stand-off has ended. One major reason for this is Mr Trump's unpredictable nature, although it is also true that the Iranians are unlikely to meet America's demands that they completely roll back their nuclear programme. Tehran's support for its regional allies, and limits to its missile programme — the other major American demands — are also red lines. Beyond this, the Iranians seem willing to place limits on their atomic programme in exchange for sanctions relief. US-led sanctions have crippled the Islamic Republic's economy, and together with internal mismanagement, the average Iranian is enduring considerable financial pain. It is also highly likely that the engagement in Muscat has not gone down well in Tel Aviv. The Israeli regime is keen to see an attack on Iran, but knows it cannot carry it out alone and thus is hopeful of dragging Washington into a new Middle Eastern quagmire. Therefore, Mr Trump needs to resist the Zionist and neocon 'advice' to attack Iran if the negotiations fail, and continue the parleys in good faith. An attack on Iran will not be child's play, and the fire arising from such a misadventure will burn the entire Middle East.

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## Water dispute

WITH a long, hot summer looming ahead, the last thing the country needs is two provinces fighting over water. Yet, that is precisely where things seem to be headed. Prompted into action by farmers' protests, the PPP, the ruling party in Sindh, has been poking and prodding the PMLN-led federal government to shelve the now deeply controversial Cholistan canals project, part of this regime's Green Pakistan Initiative. It has recently started threatening to withdraw its support for the coalition government if this



‘demand’ is not heard. This does not seem to have gone down well with the other PML-N government — the one ruling from Lahore — which last week accused the PPP of ‘doing politics’ on the issue. “It is documented, it is signed,” Punjab Information Minister Azma Bokhari had said in a rejoinder to PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari rejecting the project, referencing the claim that President Asif Ali Zardari had lent it his approval — although he had asserted in his speech to parliament last month that he could not support the canal proposal.

More recently, however, the Punjab government has outright accused Sindh of “eating into” its fair share of the water by cheating the system. In a recent letter to the Indus River System Authority, Punjab’s Irrigation Department accused Sindh of “underreporting discharge data”, especially at the Guddu and Sukkur barrages, as a result of which it received “additional water” while Punjab received less than its share. Clearly, this is a spat that has the potential of turning rather ugly and could also trigger a flaring up of ethno-nationalist tensions. It would be in the national interest, therefore, if the Council of Common Interests were to convene at the earliest and arbitrate the dispute fairly. The Sindh chief minister, who believes that his province has a strong case and evidence to back it up, should be given a fair hearing, as should the chief minister of Punjab, who seems to believe her province’s rightful share of water resources is not being given to it. It must be pointed out that petitions against several new water projects, including the Cholistan canal, have been pending before the CCI for quite some time, but the Council has failed to deliberate on them. Given that drought-like conditions are already threatening agricultural output in large parts of the country, this matter needs to be settled at the earliest so that no party can claim they were cheated out of their entitlement.

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## Improved outlook

REMITTANCES hit an all-time high of nearly \$4.1bn last month, breaking the streak of \$3bn per month during the July-February period, to everyone’s surprise. The March remittances rose by 37pc from a year ago and were up by 30pc compared to the previous month’s tally of \$3.1bn. Cumulatively, the flows from overseas Pakistanis have grown by 33pc in the first three quarters of FY25 to little over \$28bn from just above \$21bn the previous year. The State Bank now expects to receive \$38bn in remittances, up from previous projections of \$35bn this year. The growth in remittances this year is owed to a stable exchange rate, increase in the immigration of tech professionals to the Gulf, and the relative easing of import curbs. The spike in flows last month was further aided by Ramazan and Eid. Even though analysts believe that the latest tally is ‘a blip in the matrix’

due to seasonal factors, it shows the potential of significant boosts to flows in a short period with the right incentives offered to the Pakistani diaspora.

That the growth in remittances has far outpaced the trade deficit during the fiscal year underlines the critical support these flows are providing to the current account. Effectively, remittances have proved to be the most crucial lifeline for Pakistan in recent years, keeping its economy afloat and enabling it to pay its burgeoning import bills as foreign official and private capital flows dry up in spite of the IMF bailout. The share of remittances in GDP for Pakistan has increased from 1pc in 2000 to around 9pc, or more than the share of exports. Encouraged by the sustained growth in cash sent home by Pakistanis abroad, the State Bank hopes to raise its international reserves to \$14bn by end-June, despite significant debt payments made this year.

That said, Pakistan also owes a lot to improvement in other economic fundamentals for the upgrade by Fitch Ratings in the long-term foreign currency issuer default rating by one notch to 'B-' from 'CCC+' with a stable outlook. It earlier had a B- rating with a stable outlook from December 2018 to July 2022. The rating upgrade is expected to bolster investor confidence — both domestic and foreign. The upgrade will make it easier for Pakistan to access international debt markets as the government plans to raise cash from Chinese and other bond markets later this year to meet its large funding needs that exist in spite of regular debt rollovers and safe deposits from friendly countries. Other global rating agencies are expected to follow suit and upgrade their ratings for Pakistan, deepening investor confidence in its debt. As the State Bank governor said, Pakistan has seen off a period of macroeconomic instability — characterised by high inflation, low reserves and fears of default. Now it is time to build on the gains.

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## Double-edged sword

THE generous 'incentives package' for Pakistani expats, announced by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, is yet another symptom of the Dutch disease afflicting Pakistan's economy. In our case, however, the disease is not linked to natural resources, which mostly remain unexplored, but to the growing reliance on workers' abroad to stay afloat.

Amid drying up foreign loan and aid flows, the dependence on remittances has had a major role in crowding out manufacturing and exports, leading to deindustrialisation over more than a decade. The package for overseas Pakistanis comprises special courts to address their cases, age relaxation in government jobs, medical college quotas for their children, relief in banking and business transaction taxes, green channel facilities at airports, civil awards, etc. It is intended to salute their contribution, in the shape of

remittances, to Pakistan's development. Separately, the government has lifted the 3pc federal excise duty on real estate transactions, which will indirectly benefit the expats, who are major investors in the property sector, as well as the developer mafia.

How does it make any sense to incentivise consumption and unproductive real estate investments — which form the core of our economic troubles — by them? Media coverage of the two-day Overseas Pakistanis Convention did not reveal any inclination on the part of the 1,200 participants from across the world to set up manufacturing units or invest in their motherland's farm economy.

No doubt, in recent years, remittances have provided critical support to the current account. But they have also been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they help us pay our burgeoning import bills and compensate for the dwindling foreign official and private inflows as well as stagnating exports; on the other, they are largely responsible for the rapid increase in imported consumption, unplanned urban sprawls, currency volatility, anti-export bias, etc.

With foreign investment having bottomed, remittances should be channelled into productive sectors to boost output and exports for a durable solution to the recurring balance-of-payments crisis. This can be done by making investment in industry and agriculture attractive through cost reductions, removal of policy distortions, creation of a business-friendly climate, tax reforms, policy consistency, etc. The policies governing these sectors should apply to all: local and foreign investors, as well as overseas Pakistanis. If the government wants to give incentives, these should be for those expats who are willing to bring their money home to invest in productive segments of the economy, not just in property. What is reflected in the incentive package is a Dutch disease that has made us lazy. Instead of fixing the economy through long-term structural reforms, our policymakers and politicians are again looking for shortcuts to achieve an economic turnaround.

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## Besieged people

DESPITE all the talk about becoming a 'hard' state, Pakistan is still looking incredibly soft when it comes to dealing with ongoing state failures, such as the months-long siege of Parachinar. Tuesday saw the traders of Parachinar city go on a shutter-down strike in protest against the months-long closure of the Thall-Parachinar Road, which has cut off the city's only trade route with the rest of Pakistan. The road, the only one that leads to the city, has been cut off ever since a convoy travelling along it was attacked last November. That attack, which left 50 dead, triggered a spiral of violence that killed 130 more over the next few months before a ceasefire agreement reached earlier this year

helped stem the wanton bloodshed in the area. However, the so-called 'peace agreement' has been violated off and on, with spoilers targeting not only the locals, but also aid convoys, security forces and government officials. The people of Parachinar, meanwhile, have been rendered collateral damage, with both young and old suffering because nothing can get in or out of the city. As the president of the Parachinar Traders Union put it: "Those who are ill must wait for death, as they do not have medicines nor can they travel [for treatment]."

Locals have long complained about widespread malnutrition, untreated illnesses and the general desperation for basic necessities in Parachinar. How can such suffering be countenanced by a responsible state, especially one so enamoured of its own might and ability? How can it allow a few miscreants to make a mockery of its writ upon territory that it has dominion over? It is difficult to blame anyone in particular for what has been happening, and continues to happen, in Parachinar. This level of human suffering, regardless of who is suffering, ought to be unacceptable for any self-respecting society. That it has continued for months on end makes it the collective failure of the civilian government, of the security forces supposed to protect the area, as well as the local religious and political leadership, who ought to have by now arrived at a durable settlement of the long-standing issues that fuel routine outbreaks of bloodshed. The state should draw the line somewhere. The road to Parachinar must be reopened, and the miscreants told that there will be severe consequences for their misadventures.

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## Deadly zealotry

FEARS that mob attacks on international fast-food franchises would end up in tragedy have come true, after police say a worker at a foreign chain was shot dead in Sheikhpura earlier this week. The killing occurred after a TLP anti-Israel protest had wound up. Law enforcers say two men targeted a foreign chain, firing shots from the outside, resulting in the death of Asif Nawaz, a restaurant worker who was reportedly present in the outlet's kitchen. Earlier, several foreign eateries in various cities and towns of Sindh and Punjab had been vandalised by mobs; disturbing footage on social media shows men armed with clubs invading an outlet in Rawalpindi, as workers and patrons, including women and children, take cover. All of this is being done ostensibly in solidarity with Palestine. However, the murder and bullying of innocent people only besmirches the just Palestinian cause. The authorities must crack down on this violent behaviour before more tragedies occur.

Sadly, extremist outfits are using the name of Palestine to stay relevant in society. Some of the groups involved have also been attacking religious minorities, particularly in Punjab. The attacks on food outlets have continued, despite leading clerics calling upon people

to keep boycotts peaceful. There is no denying that Israel is carrying out a genocidal war in Gaza. However, murdering innocent people, and attacking firms assumed to be supporting the Zionist state, is indefensible. Consumers are free to non-violently boycott brands they feel may be supportive of Israel. But there can be no space for the ferocious vigilantism of extremist groups, which use emotive issues to stay in the headlines. These same groups also weaponise the sensitive issue of blasphemy to forward their dark agendas. The state must arrest and bring to justice those involved in the Sheikhpura murder, while the elements involved in attacking eateries elsewhere also need to be traced and punished. There can be no tolerance for such vile behaviour.

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## Grave desecration

THE desecration of 85 Muslim graves at a cemetery in Hertfordshire in the UK is a distressing act that deserves the strongest condemnation. The fact that many of the damaged graves belong to babies and young children only underscores the cruelty of this hate crime, which has left grieving families and the wider Muslim community in shock. While Hertfordshire Police have now confirmed that the incident is being treated as a religiously motivated hate crime, the delay in officially recognising it as such understandably frustrated affected families and Muslim community leaders. As Sergeant Irfan Ishaq of the Hertfordshire Association of Muslim Police rightly acknowledged, the pain of this crime has resonated beyond those immediately impacted, touching Muslims across the UK and beyond.

The British authorities must take swift and decisive action. Acts of hate, particularly those that target a community's most sacred spaces, are not only personal violations but also attacks on the fabric of a diverse and democratic society. Allowing such crimes to go unpunished will only embolden those who seek to sow fear and division. The UK government, alongside local authorities, must ensure that investigations into this act are pursued with urgency and transparency. Every possible lead should be followed, and the perpetrators brought to justice. Moreover, the government must prioritise meaningful engagement with Muslim communities, ensuring their safety and restoring their trust in the system. However, incidents like this do not occur in a vacuum. Rising Islamophobia, stoked by toxic rhetoric in politics and media, is creating an environment in which hate crimes have become alarmingly common in Western societies. Without robust action, such attacks risk becoming normalised. Graves are places of peace and memory. Desecrating them is a profound moral violation and points to the most sinister of intentions. Authorities must find and punish those responsible and also reassure the

nation's Muslim communities that they have a secure and respected place in British society.

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## Political solution

THOUGH the BNP-M may have ended its 20-day protest sit-in outside Quetta on Wednesday, the core issues affecting Balochistan — terrorism and the alienation of large sections of the province's population from the centre — remain unresolved. Former chief minister and BNP-M head Akhtar Mengal decided to wrap things up after the state did not allow him or his supporters to march to Quetta. The veteran politician had initiated a protest campaign after the authorities detained BYC's Mahrang Baloch and other activists. Mr Mengal blamed the state for "obstructing" his march, and said that while the sit-in had ended, protests would be held across different cities and towns in Balochistan to continue to press for their demands. Several opposition parties and activists expressed solidarity with the BNP protest, though the government did not yield. In fact, Balochistan CM Sarfraz Bugti continued to use strong language against the BYC, while commenting on the BNP's decision to call off the sit-in.

While proponents of the 'hard state' may argue that Baloch political activity must be crushed along with separatist terrorism, this approach is counterproductive. Violence will continue to haunt Balochistan as the separatists use terrorism to forward their aims, and the state strikes back with full force. An alternative path — dialogue, reconciliation and inclusive development — can be tried, if the state wishes to give it a shot. After all, decades of a militarised approach to solving Balochistan's problems failed to achieve any meaningful objective. First, the government needs to differentiate between those who take up arms against the state, and those who use peaceful constitutional means to demand their rights. The former must be neutralised, while the latter should be engaged. At the other end, some activists resort to harsh anti-government rhetoric; this will hardly help the Baloch cause. Secondly, the state needs to acknowledge that mistakes have been made. This would not be a sign of weakness, but one of wisdom. For example, the problem of enforced disappearances and other violations of fundamental rights in Balochistan is not a new one. Today, it is the BYC that is raising these issues; earlier it was Mama Qadeer and others. If the state uses unconstitutional means in the province, there will be blowback from those affected. Therefore, a more compassionate and inclusive approach is needed in Balochistan.

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## Paying the price

THE freak hailstorm that swept across northern Pakistan on Wednesday, claiming lives and causing destruction, indicates how climate chaos is fast becoming our new normal. Social media was awash with videos showing 'golf ball-sized' icy projectiles damaging vehicles and solar panels in Islamabad, flash floods disrupting traffic on the Peshawar-Torkham Highway, and standing crops in Punjab and KP suffering damage.

This month alone has seen weather swings that defy historical precedent. Just days earlier, the Met Office warned of an intense heatwave gripping much of the country, with temperatures in Sindh and Balochistan forecast to be 6°C to 8°C above average. Drought-like conditions in large parts of southern Punjab and Sindh had already raised fears about falling wheat yields, while strong gusts and hail have now damaged crops in KP as well. Pakistan, it is clear, is trapped in a relentless cycle of climate volatility. The contrast between these extremes — from drought to heatwave to destructive storms — paints a troubling future.

Compounding these challenges is the disheartening global shift in climate policy. The resurgence of climate scepticism has led to a rollback of critical climate finance commitments. Notably, America's recent withdrawal from major climate finance pledges has further narrowed the window for developing nations to adapt. For a country like Pakistan — among the most climate-vulnerable yet least responsible for global emissions — this is a crushing setback. Hopes of external funding to invest in resilience, disaster preparedness, and clean technology appear more remote. Simultaneously, the decline in fossil fuel prices has prompted many countries to double down on oil and gas investments. Media reports have highlighted a \$200bn surge in new LNG projects, posing a significant threat to global climate goals.

Internally, Pakistan faces another set of challenges. The ongoing water dispute between Punjab and Sindh over the Cholistan canal project underscores the urgency of equitable water resource management. With reservoir levels at Tarbela and Mangla alarmingly low, and agricultural output threatened by both drought and extreme weather, the risk of food insecurity looms large.

Despite this grim outlook, Pakistan must respond with clarity and urgency. It cannot afford to rely on undelivered pledges or assume that relief will come from abroad. A national climate action plan must be urgently updated and enacted. This includes better forecasting for such events, reformed irrigation and farming practices, and serious water conservation efforts. We are being forced into a future shaped by climate uncertainty, and must confront this crisis with the seriousness it deserves — not as a series of isolated calamities, but as a structural threat to national survival. With foreign aid in retreat, the burden of action rests squarely on the state.

## Deadlocked

PAKISTAN'S sputtering democracy finally seems to have stalled. It had been evident for the past few years that the nation would soon arrive at a crippling deadlock unless one of the many protagonists in the ongoing political saga decided to take a step back.

In the absence of any serious effort towards a drawdown, the political system has now completely lost steam. The question of what comes next should cause a fair bit of unease. Divided and conquered, the political leaders who have long steered the country find themselves at a loss.

Those in power cannot face the public, and those out of power cannot make anything of the public's support. They have mutually surrendered the state to unelected, unaccountable quarters. As a result, the judiciary has fallen, the executive has been compromised, and the legislature rendered almost redundant. Shut out, the ordinary citizens of Pakistan have no one to turn to for their problems.

'A government of the few, by the few, for the few.'

There is no escaping that label. The Pakistani political system has been soulless for so long that even the staunchest democrats have been complacent about the country's descent into totalitarianism. Politicians' refusal to talk to each other and resolve issues with negotiation has created space for a different type of rulership to take over.

Even now, with KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur recently stating that PTI chief Imran Khan is ready for talks, 'not for his sake, but for the sake of the country', it is known that that proposition is a non-starter. Mr Khan obviously does not want those talks with his fellow politicians, and his fellow politicians therefore see no option but to assert themselves more forcefully so they may keep holding onto their power. Pakistan may need democracy, but no one really seems to want it.

The Machiavellian approach taken by the coalition government has seen it cross many lines that should never have been crossed. There is much strength in the criticism that it seems to exist solely to serve vested interests, and one day it must be held to account for the extensive damage it has caused.

At the same time, the PTI, the main party in opposition, also has a lot to answer for. The party has never felt any responsibility for leading the country down the path of bitter divisiveness and polarisation, and it has often wielded its influence with a dangerous recklessness, frequently crossing the bounds of reason. It is its constant belligerence that turned politics into a zero-sum game where opponents deserve no respect or consideration.

It is important that both sides acknowledge their faults and make amends. This country has seen more than its fair share of misery. It deserves better.

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## Trump vs Harvard

AMONGST the 'enemies of the people' in Trumpian America are elite universities seen as the bastions of liberal thought and academic excellence. Harvard appears to top the list of undesirable institutions, as the American president has launched a frontal attack on the Ivy League school. The US administration has frozen over \$2bn in federal funds to the university, while threatening it with a ban on foreign admissions. Moreover, President Donald Trump has labelled Harvard a "disgrace" that teaches "Hate and Stupidity". The rest of the world seems to think the exclusive school attracts the brightest minds from across the globe. Harvard is, of course, not alone; Columbia, Princeton and Stanford have also received threats and funding cuts from the Trump administration. The primary reason for this attack on US higher education seems to be the liberal leanings of these schools, and their promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion programmes. But perhaps an even bigger reason for the punitive measures is the fact that many of these varsities, particularly Harvard and Columbia, were centres of the pro-Palestine student movement that rocked the US as Israel's genocidal war in Gaza raged. That is why they have been tarred with the brush of antisemitism by the Trump White House, and accused of hosting students "hostile to American values" and "supportive of terrorism".

The Harvard administration is fighting back and has refused to give up its freedom. Other US schools should emulate its example, and resist the totalitarian attacks of the Trump government. For decades, America's top schools have attracted the best minds globally; but with these chilling developments, American universities may lose their attractiveness, as international students head for less suffocating climes. According to Al Jazeera, around 1,500 foreign students and faculty members have had their visas revoked by the Trump government. Antisemitism is a fig leaf, and what the US government really wants to do is target academic freedom and support for Palestine on campuses. The fact is that student activism has a long history in America, as students were at the forefront of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s. Now, as the US bankrolls and supports another unjust war, the administration is keen to stamp out all dissent on campus, in the process harming the reputation of American higher education for years to come.

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## External account stability

DRIVEN by a major spike in workers' remittances last month, the country's current account posted a record monthly surplus of \$1.2bn, surpassing the previous high of just below \$1bn in 2012. Yet the balance-of-payments turned negative for the fifth month during the ongoing year due to weakening foreign official and private capital inflows amid heavy debt payments — though overall, the July-March balance-of-payments remains positive. The cumulative nine-month surplus of just less than \$2bn has reinforced hopes of the current account closing the present fiscal year with a surplus, encouraging the State Bank to upgrade its foreign exchange reserves projection from \$13bn to \$14bn at the end of June as the authorities are hopeful of some planned foreign inflows materialising after the disbursement of the second IMF loan tranche.

On the face of it, the current account surplus lends a feeling of external stability. In a way, it is a sign of a stable external account: pressure is off the currency; reserves are rising; debt payments are being made on time; etc. But this stability is not durable and is founded on factors like controlled trade deficit due to unspoken curbs on imports, lower global oil prices amid the tariff war launched by America, and most importantly, a massive unexpected surge in remittances. In the emerging global scenario, even the slightest shock can cause harm. Sustainable external account stability depends on a strong financial account. Simply put, it is long-term FDI and official flows and a country's export earnings that guarantee durable improvement in its balance-of-payments position, and help it build up international reserves. If these flows are not improving, it indicates defects in the economy's structure. While the increase in remittances leading to a stable current account is welcome, it would be unfortunate if our policymakers did not use this respite in the economic crisis to put the economy on a strong, more sustainable footing.

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## Canal politics

THERE seems to be little the PPP can do apart from repeatedly threatening that it will withdraw its support for the ruling coalition if plans to build new canals on the Indus are not dropped.

The backlash has been severe in Sindh, and the PPP appears to have realised that it must distance itself from the canal projects if it wishes to keep public sentiment in its favour. The party has suffered a hit to its political capital because it is perceived as being tightly tethered to the current regime.

Not only that, there are also lingering doubts about the PPP's claim that it was blindsided on the matter. Even though the party has repeatedly refuted claims by PML-N leaders that President Asif Zardari himself greenlit the canals, and has also sought the Council of Common Interests' intervention in the matter, the general sentiment in Sindh has soured because of the perceived threat to the province's lifeline.

Had drought-like conditions in Sindh not made the Indus water levels a matter of life or death for its inhabitants, the issue may have been swept under the rug. Canal protests led by nationalists, farmers and civil society leaders were largely ignored before the Sindh government formally entered the conversation. The Green Pakistan Initiative, under which these canals are to be made, is, after all, a project of 'national interest'.

It appears that the PPP could not, at least initially, openly oppose the canals given the stakes involved. However, once it became clear that public anger was only building up, the party realised it needed to fight the case. If it is serious, it will need more than threats to make its voice heard. Punjab has made it clear it has little interest in Sindh's problems. Indeed, several recent steps it has taken, such as opening the Taunsa-Panjnad link canal, have been seen as a direct provocation by the lower riparian.

It is obvious that the interests of the people of Sindh were not factored in when decisions regarding the canal projects were being made at the high table. Even the party representing the province arguably neglected its duty in this regard. The consequences of the state taking decisions without regard for its people can be seen yet again in the form of widespread restlessness and anger.

The country can ill-afford a dispute of this nature at this juncture. With KP and Balochistan already reeling from unrest and violent upheaval, a Sindh-Punjab water dispute will greatly complicate the task of attaining social stability. The CCI must be convened at the earliest, and public representatives should be given a fair chance to voice their constituents' concerns. The state should be putting out fires, not lighting new ones.

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## Lesser citizens

CAN the state ever turn the dream of communal harmony into reality? A slew of injustices torment Pakistan's religious communities; acceptance and empathy have run out, and extremism has found space. The latest case of savage vigilantism saw a 46-year-old Ahmadi man lynched by, according to police, TLP supporters who stormed the community's place of worship in Karachi's Saddar area. The far-right political outfit, 400 of whose supporters were outside the premises, has denied the allegation. The gory episode has been condemned by the HRCP as a "failure of law and order". Meanwhile, figures in The Human Rights Observer report from the Centre for Social Justice expose

a worrying rise in the misuse of blasphemy laws, forced conversions and bigotry against minorities — 344 blasphemy cases were registered in 2024; 70pc of the accused were Muslims and 14pc Ahmadis. Forced conversions are also at a shocking level — between 2021 and 2024, 421 cases were recorded, involving 282 Hindu girls and 137 Christians; 71pc of the victims were minors. Despite laws being flouted, the government and the criminal justice system hesitate to take a firm position for fear of inciting right-wing elements.

Vile discriminatory practices permeate every sphere of life, even unlikely spaces. For instance, the prejudiced prison policies that deprive minority inmates of their remission rights are rarely addressed. The report states that “the provinces were sufficiently empowered to make their rules ... there is no excuse for continued discriminatory attitudes towards minority prisoners”. While Sindh is the only province that has revised archaic laws with the Sindh Prisons and Corrections Services Act, 2019, the other three provinces are still governed by the Prisons Act, 1894, the Prisoners Act, 1900, and the Prisons Rules, 1978. Hence, the mix of systemic bias and colonial laws strips poor non-Muslim prisoners of rights such as legal aid, keeping them in the dark about remission rules and provisions for formal and religious education. Pakistan has failed its marginalised sections for too long. International treaties, such as the ICCPR, ratified in 2010, which stipulates that “all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect” must be upheld through an empowered National Commission for Minorities Rights to connect law enforcement with minority citizens before the situation worsens. Prisoners should not be deprived of their dignity.

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## Winning spree

AFTER sealing qualification for the ICC Women’s World Cup, Pakistan skipper Fatima Sana immediately set her sights on ramping up preparations for the tournament. Better competition — including against the top sides in the women’s game — she said will help Pakistan brace for the challenge ahead. The onus is on the Pakistan Cricket Board to provide those opportunities, with Fatima saying her team is looking to continue breaking barriers for women’s cricket in Pakistan. Her side made the best use of the home advantage in the World Cup qualifying tournament, rediscovering their form and winning all their five matches to book their spot at this year’s event in India. Before the qualifiers, they had last won a One-Day International in December 2023. Pakistan, though, will be playing their matches on a neutral venue in accordance with the agreement reached between the PCB and the Board of Control for Cricket in India ahead of the Champions Trophy. India showed at the latter tournament how much of an advantage that was and it is Pakistan’s turn to make the best of it. Details of where Pakistan will play their games



will be clear soon, but for now, the side should be looking to build on their performances in the qualifiers.

All-rounder Fatima led the team from the front as her side beat Ireland, Scotland, 2013 World Cup runners-up West Indies, Thailand and finally Bangladesh. Batters Sidra Amin and Aliya Riaz struck three half-centuries each across the five games with opener Muneeba Ali getting two. Spinners Nashra Sandhu and Sadia Iqbal impressed, with the pacers contributing too. The team's task now is to improve Pakistan's dismal record at the World Cup, where they have won just three of their 30 matches so far. The signs, though, show that Pakistan can improve on their fifth place finish at the World Cup in 2009. But there is still work to be done, as Fatima pointed out.

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## Middle East carnage

As the bloodbath in the Middle East continues unabated — from the Israeli genocide in Gaza, to the American aggression against Yemen — the 'democracies' of the West as well as members of the 'ummah' remain unmoved by the grievous loss of life.

On Friday, the Americans struck an oil facility in the Yemeni port of Hodeidah, ostensibly to degrade the capabilities of the pro-Iran Houthi movement, which acts as Yemen's de facto government. Nearly 80 people were reportedly killed in the attack, which has been described as the bloodiest since Washington began its anti-Houthi campaign in January 2024, ostensibly to assure 'freedom of navigation' in the Red Sea, and protect Israel. While there is disagreement on a wide range of issues, both the Trump administration and its predecessor were convinced that that Yemen must be relentlessly bombed.

Meanwhile in Gaza, there is no end to the butchery, as the death toll since Oct 7, 2023, has reached over 51,000. Just under 100 people were massacred on Thursday and Friday by Tel Aviv, with more butchery over the weekend.

While every human life is supposed to matter, it seems that to many in the world, the people of Yemen and occupied Palestine are not human. The argument that 'only' the Houthis are being bombed in Yemen is not convincing, as it is impossible to prevent civilian casualties in such widespread, indiscriminate bombing. Moreover, many of the facilities Washington hits are also used by civilians, which translates to more suffering for the Yemeni people, who have already endured a decade of war.

Earlier, the US and its Western allies were backing the Saudi war against the Houthis; now Washington has taken matters into its own hands, supposedly to counter Iran and protect Israel from the Yemeni threat.

Gaza, of course, is a textbook case of how a modern genocide is carried out. Hamas has said it is willing to release all Israeli hostages if Tel Aviv stops the war and withdraws from Gaza. The warmongers in Israel, however, do not seem interested in the offer.

The butchery in Gaza and Yemen — as well as Israeli aggression against Syria and Lebanon — shows that the old, West-led ‘rules-based order’ is dead. In fact, Washington and Tel Aviv freely spread disorder wherever they deem fit, even if it means violating the sovereignty of nations. A very dangerous precedent is being set here. It shows that earlier protestations about ‘human rights’ and ‘rule of law’ were mere eyewash; it is raw power that inspires and motivates states in the international arena. In the Middle East it is the law of the jungle that prevails. However, those behind the aggression should remember that this reckless behaviour can spark a much wider conflict which will be very difficult to contain.

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## A new page

FOREIGN Secretary Amna Baloch’s trip to Dhaka has breathed new life into Pakistan’s long-dormant relationship with Bangladesh. Talks were held after a diplomatic pause of 15 years in a cordial atmosphere. For too long, ties had been icy, particularly under the ousted Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina, which was closely aligned with New Delhi and maintained a distance from Islamabad. With a different administration in Dhaka, the space has opened up for Pakistan and Bangladesh to turn a new page. A number of topics were discussed at Thursday’s meeting. The two sides welcomed the launch of direct shipping between Karachi and Chittagong and underscored the need to resume direct air links, facilitate visas and deepen trade. These steps are essential to rebuilding trust and improving people-to-people contact. Pakistan offered academic opportunities in agriculture, while Bangladesh extended technical training in fisheries and maritime studies. The two also explored enhanced cultural and media cooperation, including performances and artist exchanges.

During the consultations, Dhaka reportedly reiterated its long-standing demand for an apology for the events of 1971. While the Foreign Office acknowledged that “outstanding issues” were discussed, it emphasised that both sides expressed their respective positions respectfully. Pakistan has previously shown willingness to engage on this front — with then president Pervez Musharraf having expressed regret during his 2002 visit to Dhaka over the “excesses” of that period. Still, such issues — however sensitive — should not stand in the way of renewed cooperation. In fact, they can be addressed through continued dialogue. Islamabad must remain open to such conversations, even as it seeks to advance broader ties. There is already progress to build on: direct private trade resumed last November after decades of interruption, and government-to-government

imports followed soon after. High-level contacts, including at the D-8 summit and through telephone exchanges between leaders, indicate a mutual willingness to move forward. As the region grapples with shifting alliances and economic uncertainty, stronger ties between Pakistan and Bangladesh serve both nations. Increased trade, academic collaboration and people-to-people exchanges — including scholarship opportunities and cultural engagement — must be prioritised. This is a relationship that deserves far more attention than it has received in recent years. The foundations for reconciliation have been laid. It is time to build upon them.

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## No stone unturned

WHILE the absence of new polio cases since Feb 10 is welcome news, this pause in transmission must not breed complacency. With a nationwide campaign set to officially kick off today, the focus must be on deepening oversight, not declaring premature victory. Pakistan is still one of only two countries where polio is endemic. Though current trends are encouraging, with six cases reported this year so far, 2024 saw 74 cases, and environmental surveillance continues to detect traces of the virus. The virus has not been eliminated — it is merely silent. Any gaps in coverage or oversight now could allow it to re-emerge with devastating consequences.

As 415,000 workers fan out to vaccinate 45.4m children, it is imperative that the system incentivises honesty over performance. Workers must be under no pressure — financial or otherwise — to manipulate numbers to show inflated coverage. The government's announcement of third-party validation from April 28 to 30 is a step in the right direction, but rigorous oversight must continue year-round. Digital tracking of vaccine cold chains must also be extended across all districts. Moreover, polio teams must be empowered to report every refusal without fear of reprimand. These refusals are not necessarily failures — they can be turned into opportunities to engage and educate. Respectful, data-driven dialogue with hesitant families is key. Supervisors must ensure follow-ups and make multiple visits where needed. In high-risk areas such as Karachi, Larkana, and Quetta, no household must be overlooked. The prime minister's directives and provincial efforts signal high-level commitment. But that commitment must trickle down to daily implementation. Even one child missed is a risk to all children — the virus exploits the smallest cracks in the system. Pakistan has come close to eradication before, only to see the virus return. This time, let every number be verified, every refusal be noted, and every child be protected. There are no shortcuts to eradication. We must leave no stone unturned.

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## Dar in Kabul

THE recent visit to Kabul by Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar is a sign that Pak-Afghan relations may be moving in a more positive direction.

Mr Dar's interactions with the Afghan Taliban leadership were quite cordial, with promises from both sides to improve ties and address the irritants standing in the way of better relations. Ishaq Dar met the acting Afghan PM and the foreign minister, among other top officials. The Kabul authorities assured Pakistan that Afghan soil would not be used against this country, while Mr Dar expressed similar sentiments.

The high-level exchange comes after a period of relative turmoil, with both sides at times trading fire at the border, and Pakistan expressing frustration with the Taliban authorities for failing to neutralise the Afghanistan-based TTP.

From here, the warm smiles and promises to prevent hostile actors from harming either country must be translated into concrete efforts. Pakistan has suffered immensely due to TTP terrorism, and the state rightly feels that the Afghan Taliban have not done enough to prevent the terrorist group from attacking this country. That is why Kabul — as well as the Taliban high command in Kandahar — must ensure that the TTP and other anti-Pakistan groups are put out of business, and not able to harm Pakistan.

A recent BBC report has highlighted a disturbing fact: the banned TTP and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan have managed to acquire many of the weapons left behind by the Americans during their chaotic retreat in 2021. Both the US and the Afghan Taliban have a responsibility to ensure that terrorist groups are not able to access and use such sophisticated weaponry against Pakistan.

Mr Dar also said that border management and security issues would be addressed. As these unresolved issues have led to armed skirmishes between both states and frequent closures of frontier crossings, it is imperative that border disputes are resolved justly and speedily.

Moreover, Kabul called upon Pakistan to end the "mistreatment" of Afghan refugees that are being returned to their home country. Mr Dar promised to handle the returning Afghans with respect. While the repatriation process continues, Pakistan should treat these individuals with dignity, while Western states must speed up the process of accepting those Afghans that once worked for them, as they may face dangers to their life if sent back to their homeland.

On Kabul's part, ensuring that no group based on its soil is able to harm Pakistan would be the biggest CBM, and lead to a vast improvement in ties. Islamabad, meanwhile, can build bridges with the Afghan side by handling the repatriation process in a more humane

manner and listening to Kabul's concerns regarding trade. Concentrating on these key areas can lead to a more normal and productive bilateral relationship.

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## Ready to talk

ADVISED to the Prime Minister Rana Sanaullah's phone calls to Sindh Information Minister Sharjeel Memon regarding the planned construction of a new canal on the Indus to irrigate the desert in Cholistan should have come much earlier. The political challenge this contentious issue has created for the PPP in its bastion of rural Sindh, due to the PML-N's refusal — until now — to discuss the planned canal, means that the party has little room to step back from its demand for the complete cancellation of the scheme without incurring significant political losses. The statement from Mr Memon's office following Mr Sanaullah's first call reaffirms the PPP's position. Nevertheless, the federal government's offer to resolve the concerns of the people of Sindh through dialogue is a welcome development. Both coalition partners should utilise the opportunity to discuss and evaluate the sensitive issue on its technical merits and in accordance with the procedures laid out in the Constitution. Had the PML-N leadership taken this step a few months earlier, the planned irrigation project might not have turned into another contentious 'Kalabagh dam' moment.

It is hard to dismiss the concerns of the people of Sindh over the project as they fear the Green Pakistan Initiative's plan to develop new canals for corporate farmers could leave their province without water. Being the lower riparian, Sindh has seen its delta shrink, dozens of villages disappear, and tens of thousands of people displaced due to increasing seawater intrusion. Punjab's claim that the canal will be fed by either the floodwaters from the Indian-controlled Sutlej or its own share of the Indus system is not supported by data. Most hydrologists have either opposed the scheme or at least called for an extensive study of the proposal before its execution. But the Shehbaz Sharif government had ignored criticism of the canal, even refusing to convene the CCI, the highest constitutional forum to adjudicate interprovincial disputes, for a decision. The offer for a dialogue notwithstanding, the chances of the PML-N yielding to the PPP demand and scrapping the planned canal appear very slim, given the strong backing of the project by the powers that be. Nevertheless, that bridge may become easier to cross if the PML-N and PPP are able to take a joint stand backed by a scientific study on the technical feasibility of the canal.

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## Grassroots governance

WHEN something as basic as a functioning union council is absent in over a quarter of Balochistan's areas more than two years after elections, it sends a clear message: local government there is not a priority. This neglect — by both the provincial government and the centre — severely undermines democracy at the grassroots and reinforces the perception that Balochistan remains peripheral to national policymaking. And yet, the situation is hardly unique to that province. Despite Article 140-A of the Constitution mandating LGs, and repeated Supreme Court directives, no province has fully embraced devolution. Instead, LG elections have been repeatedly delayed, underfunded, or rendered toothless. This is no accident. Both federal and provincial lawmakers view empowered LGs as a threat to their control over development funds and patronage networks. Consequently, a system intended to bring governance closer to the people is treated as expendable.

This short-sighted approach has had severe consequences. From waste management to basic education and water supply, service delivery across the country suffers because decision-making remains centralised. The 18th Amendment may have devolved powers to the provinces, but the devolution has not reached the districts and union councils where it is most needed. Pakistan's urban challenges and rural underdevelopment alike stem from this democratic gap. Local bodies can help manage rapid urbanisation, promote inclusivity, and build resilience against disasters. Countries like China and South Korea have shown how empowering LGs can boost both human development and economic growth. Fixing this will require constitutional amendments that clearly define LG powers, ensure regular elections, and mandate direct elections for mayors and chairpersons. Provinces must also be held accountable through mechanisms like a strengthened provincial finance commission and grants tied to service delivery. Until we shift power closer to the people, our crises — from sanitation to schooling — will remain unresolved. The time for centralised control is over; it is time to govern from the grassroots.

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## Centre's shadow

THE KP Assembly remains deeply divided over proposed contentious mining legislation. Even many of the ruling PTI legislators have opposed the draft bill approved by the provincial cabinet some weeks ago.

In Balochistan, a more controversial version of the law was passed by the province's legislature during a brief Ramazan session. In spite of the initial political 'consensus', the new law is now being opposed by the parties which had previously lent their support to the provincial government for its smooth passage. At the heart of the opposition are



several valid concerns regarding the potential political, social and environmental fallout of the legislation.

But the main worry centres on the concealed attempts to clip the province's control of its mineral resources by giving an 'advisory' and 'non-binding' role to the centre, or through invoking 'national interest'. The legislation carries the unmistakable imprint of the civil-military SIFC, which is actively marketing Pakistan's mineral potential to foreign investors.

While those opposed to the bill in KP have successfully blocked its enactment, the opposition in Balochistan woke up too late to the fact that the bill they had helped pass, without properly reading it, would deprive the province of significant decision-making powers, transferring these to the centre. Little wonder that criticism of the efforts to curtail provincial autonomy has again been sparked; ironically, both the PML-N and PPP, which had jointly led the passage of the landmark 18th Amendment 15 years ago, seem to have forgotten their commitment to devolution in this case.

The push for the new provincial mining legislation comes from the conviction that the country's hitherto unexplored mineral wealth, estimated by the government to be worth \$6tr, could help fix the national economy, freeing it from its perpetual dependency on IMF bailouts. It is not unusual for our leadership to clutch at straws whenever they find themselves in a bind and unable to reform the failing economy.

Observers point out that with certain quarters virtually calling the shots in the economic sphere, since the formation of the SIFC, the shift in approach has become starker. Initially, the people were promised billions of dollars in investment from the Gulf countries. Later, the focus shifted to corporate farming as a panacea for our economic woes.

More recent is the talk of buried gold in our treasure island, which is being touted as a cure for the ailing economy. No doubt this hidden wealth will go a long way in bringing prosperity, but it will not be available to us for a long time.

With the federation already under strain thanks to controversial federal policies and projects, the centre should stop encroaching on provincial jurisdictions in its misplaced eagerness to control minerals.

## Seeker of peace

POPE Francis, who prayed for Palestine, died on Easter Monday. The first Argentine pontiff's diverse and progressive vision, radical for some, shaped his 12-year papacy. While many saw his time in the Vatican as a divided church, for the ordinary he was a reformer who spoke for the poor and the marginalised, and strove for interfaith accord, humanity and compassion. Pope Francis said "reality is greater than ideas", and pulled no punches in denouncing the rise of "resentful and aggressive nationalism". Often a

lonely moral voice at a time when the line between justice and evil has blurred, the late pope's liberal stance on unity and equality irked the conservatives. But practising ethical clarity, he introduced diversity in the College of Cardinals with the appointment of new cardinals from all over the world, including Pakistan's Joseph Coutts, and brought more women in senior Vatican positions than any of his predecessors.

In a xenophobic world, as the Muslims felt let down by their oil-rich brotherhood's failure to unite against Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, unequivocal condemnation and calls for ceasefire in the land of three Abrahamic faiths became central to every address by the Bishop of Rome. The first pope to wash the feet of Muslims on Holy Thursday, and to visit the Arab world for interfaith harmony and dialogue, he was set on inclusivity. An advocate for peace and humanitarian support for conflict-ridden Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Sudan, Ukraine and Palestine, his last message on Palm Sunday was to "call a ceasefire, release the hostages and come to the aid of a starving people". But sadly, he overlooked the plight of the Uighur community. It is hoped that the papal successor will take inspiration from the message to care in a memorable image — the solitary prayer service in St Peter's Square during the pandemic — and hold on to the values of solidarity and social justice.

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## Himalayan crisis

THE Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, known as Asia's water tower, is in trouble. The towering ranges have registered a 23-year low in snow persistence — the amount of time snow stays on the ground after it falls. This is particularly alarming because snow plays a vital role in maintaining river flows during dry periods. For Pakistan, which lies downstream of this vast frozen water source, the implications are especially dire, given that the country is already in a state of significant water stress. According to the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, snowmelt contributes nearly 25pc of the annual water flow to 12 major river basins. The Indus Basin, which Pakistan relies on most heavily, is particularly dependent on it. Pakistan draws over 60pc of its water needs from the Indus for irrigation, hydropower and daily use. The current 16pc decline in snow persistence in the Indus Basin means that early summer river flows could be drastically reduced, worsening water scarcity in a country already struggling with drought conditions and erratic rainfall. Just last month, the Pakistan Met Department issued a drought alert for Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab.

The reduction in snow cover, now recorded for a third consecutive year, is part of a broader climate trend affecting not just Pakistan but the entire region. Yet, for Pakistan, the stakes are existential. With agriculture forming the backbone of the economy, any disruption in water supply could lead to food insecurity, reduced hydropower output and

increased dependence on rapidly depleting groundwater reserves. It is painfully clear that swift action is required on multiple fronts, and a paradigm shift is needed in how the country views water. First, Pakistan must treat water as a scarce resource and boost investment in adaptive water management strategies — including better storage, efficient irrigation systems for agriculture and contingency planning for droughts. Second, it must work with neighbouring countries within the HKH region to strengthen early warning systems and ensure data sharing on snow and water flows. And finally, a shift in policy is needed to align national water strategies with the realities of a changing climate. If current trends continue, the region — which numbers nearly 2bn people — may be faced with an irreversible water crisis. The snow may be vanishing, but the time for decisive action must not.

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## Pahalgam attack

IN the aftermath of Tuesday's militant attack on tourists in India-held Kashmir's Pahalgam area, South Asia once again stands on a knife's edge.

Displaying a knee-jerk reaction to the tragedy, in which over 25 people were killed, the Indian foreign secretary has highlighted the alleged "cross-border linkages of the terrorist attack", dragging Pakistan into this deplorable episode.

New Delhi has responded by suspending the Indus Waters Treaty, which has survived wars and periods of tension, further downgrading diplomatic relations, and closing the Attari border crossing. Pakistan, which had initially expressed concern and condolences over the attack, will calibrate its response today, as the prime minister has convened a meeting of the National Security Committee to review the situation.

The assault has been claimed by 'The Resistance Front', a hitherto unknown entity; media reports have quoted the outfit as claiming the attack to protest against demographic changes in the disputed region. This is probably the biggest attack targeting civilians in IHK in 25 years. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has termed the assault as a possible "false flag operation". No cause can justify the targeting of innocent non-combatants, and the incident must be roundly condemned.

However, India must also look inwards and review its brutal rule in held Kashmir, which has bred immense discontent. And when all peaceful avenues for a just resolution to the Kashmir dispute are blocked, it is not surprising that some inside the occupied territory take up guns to express their anger. Ever since doing away with the disputed region's limited autonomy in August 2019, the BJP-led government has pretended that 'all is well' in IHK. That is not the case. Even voices within India are questioning the government's

claims of having established calm. For example, India's opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, has asked the rulers to move beyond "hollow claims" of peace in occupied Kashmir.

Genuine peace can only come to Kashmir — and the rest of South Asia — when this nearly eight-decade-old dispute is resolved as per the wishes of the Kashmiris, with buy-in from Pakistan and India. If the Hindu nationalist government in New Delhi thinks it can stamp out all peaceful calls for freedom and justice through brute force and intimidation, then there will be no end to blood-soaked episodes.

The tragic events in Pahalgam should serve as a wake-up call for India's rulers: if they want peace in IHK, and peace between Pakistan and India, then sincere efforts must be made to resolve the Kashmir question at the negotiating table, involving the Kashmiris as well as Pakistan.

From here, Pakistan must proceed with caution and prepare a calm yet firm response to India's allegations, and threats. While de-escalation is the preferred course of action, India should also know that any misadventure will be met by Pakistan resolutely.

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## New IMF projection

THE downgrading of the IMF's growth forecast for Pakistan by 40bps to 2.6pc is perturbing, especially considering the country's elevated poverty levels. More than 42pc of the population currently lives below the poverty line, while the World Bank estimates that 1.9m more people will fall into this category this year. An update to the World Economic Outlook notes that Pakistan's economic growth is not enough to bring down poverty, despite a stabilising economy and the easing of inflation. Economists believe that the economy must grow by 6-8pc a year to cut poverty and create jobs for 2-3m new workers. The new IMF growth projections for Pakistan are based on the multilateral financial institution's concerns about the potential impact of the high reciprocal US tariffs on its economy. Revising growth projections for the global economy as well as individual countries days after US President Donald Trump slammed his reciprocal tariffs on all of America's trading partners and higher tariffs on dozens of countries — including Pakistan — running a trade surplus with the US, it notes that the tariffs have triggered a new climate of uncertainty.

At the moment, the IMF says, the situation is complex and fluid. Countries like ours continue to wonder what sort of deal, if any, they can strike with the Trump administration to maintain their share in the world's largest consumer market. It is unclear then how Pakistan plans to negotiate with, and what it can offer, the Trump administration to get a favourable deal. However, some reports suggest that the government may offer American companies greater access to unexplored deposits of rare earth elements and dismantle

barriers to US imports. While it is important to save — in fact, expand — our share in the US market, our policymakers also need to revisit their economic strategy. The post-tariff situation poses many challenges as the world enters an uncertain era amid escalating global trade tensions, but it also offers opportunities. However, the latter can only be exploited if the focus shifts to quicker implementation of structural reforms to attract FDI to boost industrial and agricultural productivity for diversifying and increasing exports through technology transfers. Unfortunately, to avoid a backlash from the powerful business lobbies and others, the authorities continue to look for short-term economic fixes rather than taking the more difficult route of mustering the political will to execute much-needed structural reforms.

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## Stranded goods

AS controversy over the new canals continues to rage, traders across the country have begun raising the alarm over economic contagion from the crisis. With protesters blockading key nodes in the logistics routes between Sindh and Punjab, hundreds of goods trucks and fuel tankers have been stranded on the roads for days, with reports suggesting that the lines ‘stretch for miles’ in some areas. “The entire supply chain is paralysed,” according to the KCCI president. “The situation is not only hurting businesses and industries but also jeopardising employment and trade” — a concern shared by trade leaders in other parts of the country as well. Exporters of perishable items are in a particularly vulnerable position, with their goods at risk of spoiling on the roads before they can reach the ports. Others are worried that foreign buyers may cancel their orders due to the delays. Meanwhile, the Oil Companies Advisory Council has warned of potential fuel shortages upcountry if the situation is not addressed.

As goods movement both north and south remains suspended, a wide range of industries and enterprises are facing disruptions and unnecessary financial losses due to what is essentially a political failure. While the federal government and the PPP have recently agreed to collaborate on addressing Sindh’s concerns over the proposed canals, many businesses engaged in commerce and international trade may not be able to wait out a lengthy negotiation process. It is imperative, therefore, for the federal government to take immediate steps to reassure protesters that their concerns have been heard and will be justly and promptly addressed. Likewise, the Sindh government, if it is satisfied with the steps being taken at the federal level, must play its part in pacifying the protesters and ensuring that the blockades can be removed quickly and peacefully, without further confrontation. The suspension of the goods traffic will eventually start hurting ordinary people. It is crucial, therefore, for decision-makers to move quickly.

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## New Delhi's ill-advised route

WITH South Asia hurtling towards a fresh crisis after the deadly Pahalgam militant attack, Pakistan must be prepared to handle Indian provocations in a measured manner.

After a meeting of the National Security Committee in Islamabad on Thursday, chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, and attended by the top civil and military leadership of the country, the administration has announced a number of steps designed to respond to India's escalatory rhetoric in the aftermath of the tragic slayings in IHK. While stating in the official readout that "Pakistan unequivocally condemns terrorism", the government elucidated a number of tit-for-tat measures. These include a warning to suspend bilateral accords, including the landmark Shimla Agreement, a ban on Indian aircraft over Pakistani airspace, closure of the Wagah crossing, and a reduction in the number of staffers manning the Indian high commission in Islamabad. Significantly, the meeting noted that any attempt by India to prevent the flow of water to Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty — which New Delhi has held 'in abeyance' — would be considered "an Act of War".

The Indian state has certainly jumped the gun by blaming Pakistan for its own security lapses, and in the process bringing both states closer to conflict. The Indian media has not helped matters, with its armchair warriors baying for Pakistani blood, and banging the drums of war. India has blamed Pakistan for the tragedy without any credible evidence; in fact, the anti-Pakistan rhetoric began mere minutes after the killings in Pahalgam were reported.

Furthermore, the threat to discard the IWT cannot be taken lightly by Pakistan. As an agrarian state and the lower riparian, with millions depending on river waters for their livelihood, this is a matter of life and death for Pakistan, and illegally blocking river flows by India would be nothing short of a crime against humanity. Therefore, New Delhi must desist from this ill-advised path, and not tinker with the IWT.

From here, the ball is in India's court. If New Delhi continues on its current path of sabre-rattling, or worse, indulges in military adventurism, the ensuing events may spell disaster for the region. Pakistan will defend its soil; no party should entertain ideas of violating this country's frontiers. It would be better for the Indian state to reflect on the attack in held Kashmir and reconsider the misguided policies it has been pursuing in IHK. The fact is that Kashmir remains an internationally disputed issue, no matter what constitutional trickery India resorts to. If India continues to deny Kashmiris their fundamental rights, the cycle of violence will continue, and ties with Pakistan will remain bitter. Much will depend on which path India takes; the one of wisdom and reflection, or the one of jingoism and unending conflict.

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## Wheat worries

PUNJAB'S farmers are enraged. They are not getting what they call a fair price for their wheat harvest this year due to the government's decision to ditch its decades-old policy of fixing the minimum support price for the staple, besides stopping its grain procurement operations. This has left them at the mercy of the private sector, causing the 'price to crash' in the market. The Pakistan Kissan Ittehad, a body that represents a sizable number of growers from the province, has sounded a warning that farmers cultivating wheat may switch to other more profitable crops — causing food shortages — next year unless the government reverses its new policy. "Poor farmers are being strangled [due to the wheat price policy shift] ... They are unable to meet their basic needs," a PKI leader said at a press conference.

At the heart of the problem is the government's unplanned, poorly coordinated withdrawal from the wheat market beginning last year to meet a key goal of the ongoing IMF programme. The sudden reversal of the policy that regulated the wheat supply chain since the 1960s has proved to be disruptive for the unprepared farmers. But this disruption is temporary, even if it takes a couple of years and market volatility to settle. Indeed, the country's wheat procurement and price support system has historically helped farmers get prices higher than international prices for their produce while ensuring more or less stable flour rates for urban consumers. This has worked well for most stakeholders including big farmers, middlemen, flour millers, etc — at the expense of smallholders and the government, which had to bear massive costs to subsidise urban consumers and farmers. The system, which had become fiscally unsustainable due to its soaring subsidy budget and rampant corruption in its procurement operations among other factors, demanded that market forces be unleashed to correct the market's course. Given the sudden shift in policy the price shocks being felt by the farmers are not unexpected. But returning to the old system is not an option. Rather, the government must fully deregulate the wheat supply chain and allow market forces to work to avoid such shocks in future and unlock the export potential of wheat and wheat-based products. Government intervention should be restricted to helping small farmers access cheaper credit, quality inputs and new technology to boost their productivity and incomes.

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## Ending rabies

RABIES remains one of Pakistan's most deadly, yet neglected public health crises. Across the country, hundreds die agonising deaths each year from a disease that is totally preventable. Sindh has already reported nine rabies cases this year. Victims from rural areas are unable to access life-saving treatment in time due to bureaucratic delays, underfunded hospitals and lack of political will. It is estimated that 2,000 to 5,000 people die from rabies annually in Pakistan, mostly from rural communities where awareness is low and the healthcare infrastructure poor. Victims often face severe shortages of post-exposure prophylaxis, are forced to travel great distances, and resort to questionable remedies before seeking proper care — usually too late. Compounding this is a surging stray dog population, inadequately controlled through humane means. Efforts to produce vaccines locally have also stumbled. Despite manufacturing some 80,000 vials of anti-rabies vaccine, the National Institute of Health has struggled to distribute them due to federal cabinet delays in setting official prices. This bureaucratic hurdle has hindered public hospital supplies, worsening the situation.

Yet, there are examples of effective action. The Indus Hospital's Rabies Free Karachi initiative has shown that mass dog vaccination and sterilisation can curb rabies. Thousands of dogs have been treated in areas like Ibrahim Hyderi and Korangi, leading to reduced dog-bite cases. To its credit, the Sindh government-led Rabies Control Programme targets the vaccination and sterilisation of 125,000 dogs by mid-2025 and the creation of vaccination centres in 20 districts — but scaling these efforts is critical. The authorities must ensure uninterrupted vaccine supply, invest in mass dog vaccination, and conduct public awareness drives. Rabies deaths are not inevitable — they result from inaction. Without an immediate, coordinated effort, Pakistan risks falling behind the WHO global goal of zero rabies deaths by 2030. The government must act now — or stand complicit in every life lost.

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## Time for restraint

THESE are dangerous times in the subcontinent, and there is a need for both Pakistan and India to show restraint, and handle the post-Pahalgam developments with sense. Sadly, India has upped the ante by blaming Pakistan for the tragedy, without providing credible evidence of this country's alleged involvement in the brutal slaying of tourists.

Moreover, there have been shrill calls — particularly in the Indian media — for 'revenge' against Pakistan. This, along with New Delhi's condemnable measures against Pakistan, such as holding the Indus Waters Treaty 'in abeyance' and further downgrading ties, has created an incendiary atmosphere.

Pakistan understandably announced countermeasures, though perhaps it should have refrained from cancelling the visas of visiting Indians. On Friday, there were reports of gunfire across the LoC — fortunately, the exchange did not develop into a larger confrontation. But in such circumstances, when mutual trust is low and emotions, fuelled by irresponsible rhetoric, are high, chances of miscalculations increase significantly. It is because of this volatile situation that the UN chief has asked both governments to “exercise maximum restraint”.

Neither country can afford another war. Since independence, Pakistan and India have fought three major and several minor wars. It is time again to give diplomacy a chance. Unfortunately, many in New Delhi do not see peace with Pakistan as an endeavour worth pursuing, while the BJP-led regime’s deplorable actions in held Kashmir have contributed to the stifling atmosphere in the disputed region. Unless India realises that force and threats will not bring peace, the cycle of bloodshed will continue.

Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar has rightly asked India to share any evidence it may have of Pakistan’s alleged involvement in the Pahalgam atrocity “with us and the world”. Unless India does so, the opinion that the Modi government is using this country as a scapegoat for its own security failures will only be strengthened. Even voices within India are calling upon the government to probe the intelligence failure. And if any reliable leads are provided linking rogue militant elements to the incident, Pakistan should follow up with its own investigations.

The Indian media should also reconsider its jarring approach to all things Pakistan. The media plays a central role in framing public discourse. Sadly, most mainstream outlets in India have displayed an aversion to journalistic ethics, outdoing each other in hyper-nationalistic rhetoric. These hijinks can have detrimental real-world effects on regional peace.

Instead of fanning the flames, both sides, particularly India, need to bring down the temperature. Once the nationalistic din dies down, India must accept the fact that without a just solution to the Kashmir issue, peace is impossible.

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## A wise decision

GOOD sense seems to have finally prevailed, with the federal government deferring the planned canal projects, including the controversial Cholistan canal, for now. Following a meeting between Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari on Thursday, the government said it will undertake the projects only if a consensus among the provinces is achieved. A meeting of the Council of Common Interests will be convened next week regarding the issue. "...[W]e unanimously decided that no new canal will be constructed till the decision of the CCI," Mr Sharif told a joint press conference along with Mr Bhutto-Zardari. Given the sensitivities of interprovincial water distribution, a wiser political leadership would have pre-empted the public outcry over the canal projects by taking the contentious Cholistan scheme to the CCI for a consensus decision even before initiating the work on its feasibility. That it took months of protests across Sindh against the Cholistan canal, the complete blockade of industrial and other supply chains to and from Punjab for the last week and a half, and the PPP's 'threats' of quitting the coalition before the government took a step back shows that the actual decision-making powers regarding the project lie somewhere else.

That the matter has been referred to the CCI, the highest constitutional forum empowered to decide disputes that involve the provinces, indicates that the doors to an arbitrary decision on the scheme may have been closed. So far so good. But the pause does not necessarily guarantee that the project has been cancelled altogether. Still, the canal plan is unlikely to move forward anytime soon, at least not unless a solid, independent technical study of the proposed water channel is carried out and the buy-in of all the provinces, especially Sindh, achieved. This development should be enough to reassure the protesters who should lift the blockade of the national highway to allow smooth cargo and passenger movement between Sindh and Punjab. No doubt the episode has left a bad taste in the mouth and had added to the federation's strain. However, the PM's word on the issue should be respected. One also hopes that the PML-N will do better and avoid such controversies in the future.

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## 'Fake' Pakistanis

THE revelation is shocking. Hundreds of individuals holding Pakistani passports who were detained by the Saudi government were discovered during investigations to not be Pakistanis at all, but Afghans who had managed to fabricate their national identity and obtain travel documents from Pakistan. The Senate Standing Committee on Interior was told on Thursday that the Saudi authorities had flagged a total of 1,296 Afghan nationals who had acquired Pakistani passports through fraudulent means, ostensibly with the help

of local collaborators exploiting weaknesses in the national identity registration system. Informed sources say there was a loophole in the family registration process, which Nadra recently closed, and which allowed new family members to be registered under a Pakistani national's family tree based on fabricated, union council-issued birth certificates. This was exploited by foreigners to register themselves as members of Pakistani families and then use these altered records to acquire CNICs and passports on which they travelled abroad.

It is no wonder that Pakistanis have been facing immense difficulties securing visas to travel abroad. Issues like these are bound to make even the most 'brotherly' of nations view visitors from this country with deep suspicion, and one cannot really blame them. After all, if Saudi Arabia alone has been able to nab hundreds of Afghans who had successfully given Pakistani authorities the slip, there may be many more in other parts of the world. Such actions — be they taken by any foreign national on Pakistani soil — represent a major liability for this country. Any crimes they commit or trouble they cause besmirch Pakistan's image and create difficulties for its citizens. The authorities must, therefore, take action against such individuals and their accomplices. Nationality records must be thoroughly reviewed to identify travellers suspected of having acquired Pakistani documentation through illegal means, and they should be asked to provide proof of their citizenship. It is also important to identify local collaborators and give them exemplary punishments. Foreign trust will not be restored unless there is transparent action.

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## From gains to gaps

AS we mark World Immunisation Week 2025 — themed 'Immunisation for All is Humanly Possible' — we are faced with a tragic reality: after decades of gains, global vaccination efforts are hitting turbulence. Outbreaks of measles, meningitis and even yellow fever are resurging, with measles cases alone up 20pc in 2023 to over 10m. Diseases once nearly vanquished are creeping back as routine immunisation falters in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, support for immunisation is flagging: funding has been slashed, notably the Trump administration's rollback of America's contributions to vaccine programmes. The WHO and Unicef warn that donor cuts have disrupted vaccination efforts in nearly half of the 108 countries surveyed — a recipe for the return of preventable diseases.

For Pakistan, the stakes are especially high. It is one of only two countries in the world where wild polio still circulates, and after coming close to eradication it has seen a worrying resurgence — climbing to 74 polio cases in 2024. At the same time, routine

immunisation has stagnated. Last year, 1.2m Pakistani infants — out of the 7.3m targeted — missed their measles vaccinations, leaving the door wide open to outbreaks. Vaccination coverage remains highly uneven across the country, with consistently low rates in Balochistan, southern Punjab, parts of Karachi, and areas of southern KP. Pakistan is home to over 600,000 zero-dose children annually — those who have never had even a single vaccine dose. Many live in conflict-affected or remote areas, underscoring the urgent need to extend vaccine access beyond urban centres. Multiple factors have stalled our immunisation progress. Misinformation and distrust are rife; bizarre conspiracy theories about vaccines still circulate. This was exacerbated by a CIA-sponsored fake vaccination drive in 2011 — a deception that validated the worst suspicions. Extremist propaganda seized on that episode to demonise polio drops. To this day, health workers, and those protecting them, face threats on the job. Just this week, two security personnel guarding a polio team were martyred.

Yet these challenges can be overcome — because immunising every child is indeed humanly possible. The first priority is rebuilding trust — and ensuring vaccinators can work safely on the front lines. Health officials should partner with the ulema, community elders and teachers to champion vaccination and dispel myths; when religious leaders publicly affirm that vaccines are safe and halal, it boosts community acceptance. The second imperative is practical: ensure a reliable vaccine supply, strengthen the cold chain, and bolster disease surveillance so that doses safely reach every village. Pakistan's Covid-19 response proved it can execute mass vaccination — delivering over 300m vaccine doses through organised drives. That same level of national resolve is now needed to ensure no child is left vulnerable to preventable diseases.

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## Crisis talks

ASININE statements about Pakistan and India's '1,500-year' dispute over Kashmir are unlikely to help this corner of the world navigate its latest almost-war.

Directed efforts to reduce tensions and force diplomacy just might. It seems India may have overplayed its hand by jumping straight to accusations against its eastern neighbour, which the rest of the world has not been as ready to accept as it may have hoped. This should boost morale in Islamabad, and Pakistani authorities have made the right move by calling for a neutral, international probe into the Pahalgam tragedy.

But with America neck-deep in the Ukraine and Middle East crises, there seems to be little interest in Washington about the possible outcomes of the latest Pakistan-India flare-up. Various Trump administration officials have offered India their sympathies and some support, but not the validation New Delhi has desperately sought for its combative stance



against Pakistan. But US President Donald Trump can do better than expect the two states to “get it figured out, one way or another”.

India’s extreme reaction to the attack has created a situation in which a global intervention may be necessary to create space for de-escalation, and Mr Trump, who claims to know the leadership of both countries, may be better placed than most to find a way out.

Meanwhile, others are already attempting to defuse the crisis. The foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran, both countries with strong relationships with India and Pakistan, have made phone calls to Islamabad and New Delhi, offering to mediate crisis talks.

The UN has called for maximum restraint and “meaningful mutual engagement”, with the UN spokesman telling media in New York that issues between the countries “can be and should be resolved peacefully through meaningful mutual engagement”. There is, after all, much at stake given both countries’ nuclear-armed status and propensity for conflict.

It is therefore far more mature to seek de-escalation through intermediation than to expect that the two countries, which even ordinarily refuse to talk to each other, will figure out their differences in the midst of a severe breakdown in trust.

It is hoped that other responsible world powers will also act before any mistake or misadventure occurs that could further inflame tensions. Sense needs to be restored so that the Pahalgam attack may be independently investigated and the victims given justice.

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## BYC women in jail

THE detained Baloch Yakjehti Committee leader Mahrang Baloch and other BYC activists, including women, are reported to have been on a hunger strike since Thursday to protest against alleged police brutality and the failure of the justice system to safeguard their rights. Meanwhile, BYC supporters are staging rallies across Balochistan for the release of activists who were arrested more than a month ago under the dubious MPO law. Veteran Baloch leader Sardar Akhtar Mengal has also denounced the detention of the women activists, terming it unprecedented in the province’s history. The BYC leadership has alleged that the authorities planned to separate the detainees by transferring them to different jails.

Mahrang is apparently facing the state’s wrath for forcefully raising her voice on the issue of enforced disappearances — initially focusing on her own family and then as part of a broader movement. Since she was arrested, a malicious campaign has been launched against her on both social and mainstream media, linking her with Baloch secessionists and the gruesome attack targeting the Jaffar Express. But her support among the Baloch population has refused to wane. The PPP, which is leading the coalition in the conflict-

ridden province, should know better than most about how women prisoners are treated by jail staff in the country. It must also know that no amount of state brutality has ever been able to break the resolve of political prisoners, especially women activists. The proponents of a 'hard state', too, should realise that their actions, which do not distinguish between militant separatists and political and rights activists, have deeply alienated an entire Baloch generation, embroiling the province in a cycle of endless violence. There is no doubt that the militant secessionist elements need to be dealt with sternly, even eliminated. But at the same time the state should engage with the more practical political voices from the province and address their legitimate demands. Time is of the essence in this context.

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## Haj mismanagement

THE relevant authorities in Pakistan are often blamed for negligence and poor management when it comes to Haj arrangements — and not without reason. This time around, apparent bungling and finger-pointing may prevent around 67,000 Pakistani pilgrims from making the voyage to the holy land to carry out their religious duties. In fact, the prime minister recently held a meeting to discuss the crisis, promising to approach the Saudi government to resolve the issue, while expressing his displeasure with the religious affairs ministry over the debacle. The official Haj quota for Pakistani pilgrims — including those travelling through the government scheme and those going through private operators — is just over 179,000 individuals for the current year. But 67,000 of these intending hajjis may not make the cut. Various reasons are being cited for the lapse. Some reports indicate that the private Haj organisers have failed to meet the Saudi government's criteria, while the operators claim the problem lies with the Saudi authorities, whose system 'crashed', delaying payments. Other reports suggest that the money for Haj was sent to the wrong Saudi account.

A thorough, transparent probe is required to indicate what exactly went wrong, and to ensure it does not happen again. Moreover, the PM should request the Saudi government to allow all the pilgrims that have qualified to proceed for Haj. The fact is that mismanagement has plagued the organisation of the pilgrimage for years. In the past, a religious affairs minister, along with other senior officials, were convicted — later acquitted — in a Haj corruption case. Nearly every year, pilgrims complain of inadequate, substandard lodging and transport facilities, as well as hidden costs. The state needs to ensure that the whole Haj experience — from the application stage to the pilgrims' return home — is a smooth and painless one. This sacred rite should not be spoiled due to bureaucratic bungling and the avarice of unscrupulous organisers.

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## Culture war

THE heightened tensions between India and Pakistan have sealed the fate of Abir Gulaal. Slated for a May release and starring Pakistani actor Fawad Khan, the film now faces a ban in India. Plagued with boycott calls by extremists since it was announced, the new statement from The Federation of Western India Cine Employees not only pulls the plug on the movie but declares war on Pakistan's cultural forays: "...we have been made aware of the recent collaboration with Pakistani actor Fawad Khan for the Hindi film Abir Gulaal. In light of the recent attack in Pahalgam, FWICE is once again compelled to issue a blanket boycott on all Pakistani artistes, singers and technicians participating in any Indian film or entertainment projects ... occurring anywhere in the world." Reportedly, the BCCI is mulling a ban on bilateral cricket with Pakistan.

India's far-right ideologues and their supporters have worked overtime to instil animosity and hate; the venomous discourse on its mainstream media and social media platforms is at dangerous levels whereby, in a deeply prejudiced and polarised society, large swathes are pitted against the Muslim minority and 'Pakistani' has morphed into a slur. One can safely say that, in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India, a cricket match between the two nuclear-armed neighbours or even a random cultural event is fraught with danger for Pakistani stars and spectators. We have seen worse times — the Gujarat pogrom to cite just one — but reasonable leaderships ensured that a system of checks and balances prevented a deluge of fake news and emotionally charged language in print and electronic media. But the past is indeed another country. Today, exaggerated sentiments along with a range of communal issues have afflicted daily life in India; even the opposition parties and many progressive activists sing diluted versions of the same tune. Resultantly, the perceived war on Pakistani culture is, in reality, the monster of hate turning on its own. Fanaticism breeds its own culture, which is often hard and insular, and its impacts are difficult to erase. The Indian government should do its citizens a favour, and distance itself from the binding forces of sports, arts and culture. Their core duty is to ensure that sociopolitical pressures do not rise to a point where social cohesion lies in tatters. Cultural collaborations mean socioeconomic growth, unity, and serve as social safety valves.

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## At heat's mercy

PAKISTAN is in the midst of an intense heatwave, with temperatures soaring 4°C to 7°C above normal across much of the country.

This extreme weather is expected to persist till the end of the month, with some regions already experiencing highs of 49°C. What was once considered rare has become alarmingly common, as climate change accelerates the frequency and severity of such

events. Yet, despite repeated warnings from scientists and international bodies, Pakistan remains woefully unprepared for the escalating climate crisis.

The effects of the heatwave are rippling through every sector. Agriculture, the backbone of Pakistan's economy, is under severe stress as excess heat kills crops and worsens water scarcity. Reports of early wheat crop failures are already emerging, threatening both food security and rural livelihoods.

At the same time, water resources are being strained to the limit. Faster-than-normal snowmelt in the northern mountains, spurred by high temperatures, raises the spectre of flash floods while jeopardising water availability during the critical summer months.

Public health infrastructure is also under immense pressure. Hospitals are seeing an increase in heat-related illnesses, particularly among vulnerable groups such as outdoor labourers, the elderly and children. The memory of the 2015 Karachi heatwave, which claimed over 1,200 lives, looms large and must not be ignored. Meanwhile, power outages in various areas highlight the fragility of the energy grid at a time when uninterrupted supply is a matter of life and death.

The government must roll out relief measures without delay. As highlighted by the NDMA, cooling centres should be established in urban and rural hotspots. Water resources must be managed and prioritised for essential needs and work hours for outdoor labour should be adjusted to minimise exposure. Public health services need to be fully equipped to manage heatstroke and related conditions, and power must be prioritised for hospitals and essential water infrastructure.

Beyond these short-term interventions, there is a pressing need for a long-term strategy to adapt to the warming climate. This includes investing in water storage and management, promoting climate-resilient crops and efficient irrigation techniques, and expanding urban greenery to reduce heat absorption. Early warning systems must be enhanced, and local disaster response mechanisms strengthened to ensure timely action.

The current heatwave is not merely a temporary discomfort; it is a dire warning of what lies ahead if Pakistan fails to confront the realities of climate change. Policymakers must treat this crisis as a national emergency. The most vulnerable citizens cannot afford the cost of inaction. As temperatures continue to rise, so too must our commitment to building climate resilience. Rather than half-measures, the situation demands bold, coordinated action to safeguard lives, livelihoods and the country's future.

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## Canal consensus

IT is official. Plans to build new canals on the Indus have been shelved till such time that all provinces can find themselves in agreement that they will serve the interests of the various claimants to the river's waters.

The Council of Common Interests finally convened yesterday evening, following months of demonstrations and protests in Sindh over canals that were proposed to be built in the Cholistan region, to formally endorse the federal government's policy, namely: "that no new canals will be built without mutual understanding from the CCI". Thereafter, "It has been decided that the federal government will not move further until mutual understanding is evolved among the provinces". The PPP will take the decision back to Sindh as a major triumph for the province's people, many of whom had seen the proposed canal projects as a direct encroachment on their rights to a vital natural resource shared with another province, and had taken a strong position against the state's plans.

According to the announcement, "the provisional Ecneec approval [...] for construction of new canals and the Irsa water availability certificate [...] [have been] returned. [The] Planning Division and Irsa are directed to ensure consultation with all stakeholders, in the interest of national cohesion and to address any and all concerns until mutual understanding is reached".

This should be sufficient to address the suspicions that were being harboured by groups of protesters in Sindh, who had enforced a 10-day blockade of major logistical routes running through the province and had previously refused to disband despite the centre's reassurances to the Sindh government that it would not proceed with the project. Now that the approval for the canals has been formally 'returned', the highways must be reopened and the thousands of goods transport vehicles that have been stranded for days allowed to proceed to their destinations. The economy has incurred major losses waiting for this breakthrough.

What is next? The press release issued after the CCI meeting suggested that the CCI would engage the provincial governments to chart out a long-term consensus on agricultural policy and management of the water infrastructure across the country. Furthermore, it has been announced that a committee is being formed to ensure food and ecological security with representation from the federation and the provinces. These are commendable steps, but perhaps should have been taken much earlier.

Nonetheless, it is encouraging that the provinces are being given a direct say in proposing solutions to challenges being faced at the provincial and national levels where agricultural policy and water utilisation are concerned. There is an urgent need for such high-level engagement and consultation, especially considering the climate-related crises Pakistan faces. Perhaps some good may hav

## Incursions thwarted

THE military's media wing has released details of infiltration attempts by terrorists based in Afghanistan, saying that the intruders were confronted and neutralised. According to ISPR, at least 54 TTP terrorists were killed in North Waziristan over the last few days while trying to enter Pakistan. It added on Monday that more militants had been killed in the same area. Social media handles associated with the militants have confirmed the casualties. Moreover, at least three TTP terrorists were killed in Bajaur while trying to cross over. The events illustrate that attempts by violent armed actors to enter Pakistan continue, despite promises by the Afghan Taliban to prevent their soil from being used by anti-Pakistan groups. This pledge was reiterated during Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar's recent visit to Kabul. It seems that the Afghan side needs to be reminded of its promise. Had these intruders not been neutralised, they could have wreaked major havoc in the country.

The news of continued infiltration across Pakistan's western border comes at a time when things are heating up on the eastern border with India. It is critical, then, to take up the issue immediately with Kabul to alleviate the challenges of a volatile security situation on both frontiers. There has been regular exchange of gunfire across the LoC ever since the Pahalgam tragedy, and considering the anti-Pakistan bellicosity emanating from India, the military must remain alert to thwart any misadventure from the other side. For this, it is essential to maintain calm on the western frontier. Therefore, Pakistan needs to communicate to the Afghan Taliban that it is their responsibility to prevent terrorists from entering this country. Even in more 'normal' times, the Afghan Taliban's apparent lack of action, ie, preventing anti-Pakistan militant activity, was problematic. Now, with South Asia again in crisis mode, the need to prevent such activities becomes ever more imperative. If Kabul wants to genuinely improve ties with Pakistan, it must act without reservation against the banned TTP and other terrorist groups on Afghan soil seeking to harm Pakistan. And while diplomatic efforts are needed to deliver this message clearly to the Afghan side, the military must also maintain its vigil on the western border to ensure that terrorist groups are not able to take advantage of the evolving situation with India to stir up trouble.

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## Pension reforms

The federal government has finally notified another pension reform that requires retired public servants rehired by it to either draw a salary during the period of their re-employment or retain their pension. The reform also forbids all former federal employees from receiving multiple pensions. The measure is part of the pension reforms announced in the past couple of years to curb the burgeoning federal pension bill, which has crossed Rs1tr, including military pension costs of Rs662bn, for the current fiscal year. The pension liabilities are the fourth largest federal expenditure, growing by about 24pc per annum in recent years. The reforms are a key requirement of the ongoing IMF programme and are expected to address long-standing inefficiencies in the system, and relieve the pressures on our strained finances. For an economy burdened by unsustainable debt and that has little to spend on socioeconomic development, the pension reforms are a step in the right direction.

That said, the success of these reforms in reducing the burden on the national budget will largely depend on their being applied uniformly to both civilian and military retirees. While most reforms — such as the discontinuation of multiple pensions, reduction in the basis for calculation of future increases, etc — notified so far apply to both categories, reports suggest a delay in the implementation of the contributory pension scheme for military personnel. One of the most important decisions of the pension reforms, the scheme will be key to slashing future pension liabilities. However, pension reforms on their own are not going to solve our fiscal problems. The government also needs to look at reforming and cutting the size of, arguably, one of the world's most unwieldy bureaucracies. Without doing so, economic recovery will face obstacles. This is important not just for reducing financial costs but also for introducing efficiency into the affairs of the state and curbing the latter's interventions in the economy.

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## Info wars

AS tension persists in South Asia post-Pahalgam, the Indian state is taking steps to ensure that its people are unable to hear Pakistani points of view.

For example, on Monday, New Delhi banned 16 Pakistani YouTube channels, including portals belonging to major networks such as Dawn News, ARY News, Geo News, etc. Accounts belonging to freelance journalists and cricket commentators have also been blocked. New Delhi has taken this senseless step because it believes that the channels were spreading “provocative and communally sensitive content”.

Considering the bellicose and inflammatory anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim content being produced by many mainstream Indian channels, this justification is laughable. Other steps taken by New Delhi include blocking certain Pakistani social media handles, as well as general boycotts of Pakistani culture and sports.

Sadly, it seems that the Indian state, along with parts of its media and civil society, are creating an atmosphere for war. That would explain why the world's self-proclaimed 'biggest democracy' would feel threatened by Pakistani media outlets offering alternative viewpoints. While no doubt there are jingoistic voices on this side of the border too, the sheer size and reach of the Indian media means that war hysteria can very easily grip large segments of the Indian public.

A week after the Pahalgam tragedy, India has yet to provide conclusive proof linking Pakistan to the attack. Perhaps that is why it is keen to silence Pakistani voices, so that the Indian people are not exposed to alternative viewpoints and are prevented from questioning their government about what really happened in the scenic tourist spot in held Kashmir.

Moreover, Kashmiris in India are facing revenge attacks, with around 2,000 rounded up, while the Pahalgam episode is being used to fan hatred against India's Muslim citizens. Instead of promoting such madness, the Indian state and media would do well to adopt a more rational approach, and stop spreading anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim hatred.

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## Missing growth

PAKISTAN faces a paradox: its economy has been stabilising but growth remains elusive. The 'feel good' part of the economic recovery story forms the core of the official narrative that Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb repeated at a conference at Harvard University on Monday. "We have stabilised the fundamentals, restored confidence, and reignited growth," he argued. Acknowledging these developments, he said, Fitch had upgraded Pakistan's sovereign credit rating. However, the job of pinpointing what continues to ail the economy and prevents it from growing has been left to the State Bank, which, in its half-yearly report on the state of the economy published the same day, noted: "One of the prominent challenges long undermining the sustainability of growth is low and falling productivity that has adversely affected the country's economic competitiveness." The country's weak productivity growth has contributed to frequent balance-of-payments crises, with the economy stuck in a recurring boom-bust cycle, the report adds.

That our productivity remains low is not surprising given that the entire structure of the economy is founded on consumption to achieve growth rather than on investment in the real and social sectors to boost productivity of the economy as well as individual workers.

Decades of low investment in industrial infrastructure and agriculture means that we produce fewer things for the domestic and international markets and import more to sustain our flawed growth model. As a result, we are always looking for handouts, loans and bailouts to keep the economy afloat and pay our import bill. In the last couple of years, the authorities were forced to implement strict fiscal discipline, slash development spending and curb imports to stop the haemorrhaging of international reserves to secure multilateral funds and stave off an imminent default. This has undoubtedly helped the government somewhat stabilise the main economic fundamentals and reduce import-based consumption to improve reserves. But at the same time, it has killed growth. Economists agree that any attempt to grow faster than 3-4pc without restructuring the economy and boosting industrial and agricultural productivity would push us into a worse crisis. Yet we do not see substantive efforts being made in this respect. Our economy needs shock therapy; spirin will not work where surgery is required. Unless backed by substantive economic reforms, a feel good narrative has a very brief shelf life.

## Tribunal delays

Is justice to be delayed till such time that it becomes meaningless? At least that is the impression one gleans from the glacial pace at which the election tribunals set up after the 2024 general election have been discharging their duties. According to a report issued earlier this week by the Free and Fair Election Network, two-thirds of all disputes pertaining to last year's election remain undecided to this day. Though the legal deadline for the settlement of these disputes lapsed long ago, there still does not seem to be much urgency on the part of the tribunals. Neither, it seems, is there any interest in their activities. Meanwhile, in the 14 months since the election, the credibility and legitimacy of not only the federal government but parliament itself have repeatedly been brought into question. As a result, both stand largely diminished in the eyes of the public, unable to fulfil the roles for which they were created.

Who must one blame for this sorry state of affairs? It is not just the tribunals that are at fault. Unfortunately, the institutions entrusted with upholding and safeguarding Pakistan's democratic process and constitutional order failed to fulfil their duties when the hour came. The consequences are gradually becoming evident. The disconnect between state policy and the public has, for example, most glaringly manifested itself in widespread protests in Sindh against new canals proposed to be built on the Indus. Though the project was formally shelved on Monday, the people's distrust of the state refuses to abate, and some have vowed to continue agitating till they see the state yield completely to their demands. Elsewhere, the fracture between the state and citizenry has exposed vulnerabilities against external aggression and threats. Thus, whether those in power admit it or not, the 2024 election and its attendant crises continue to cast a long shadow over the state.

It goes without saying that Pakistan would have been in a much stronger position to confront its many challenges if the tribunals had done their job without fear or favour. But the Election Commission, the federal government, and other branches of the state made sure, through various decisions, actions and legislative interventions, that the country had little choice but to accept a governance set-up formed on the basis of poll results that have been widely questioned. One wonders how long they believe this arrangement can endure, especially with the state facing new challenges with each passing day. The public does not seem to have forgotten and the national mood is hardly conciliatory. In the present circumstances, the tribunals could have played a constructive role by rebuilding public trust in the system. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be a priority for the state.

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## DAWN Vocabulary

- **Zealotry** – Fanatical and uncompromising pursuit of ideals.  
*Context:* Deadly zealotry behind extremist violence.
- **Besmirch** – To damage reputation or dignity.  
*Context:* Actions that besmirch Pakistan's image.
- **Vigilantism** – Law enforcement by individuals without legal authority.  
*Context:* Ferocious vigilantism in political protests.
- **Desecration** – Disrespectful violation of something sacred.  
*Context:* Desecration of Muslim graves in the UK.
- **Sinister** – Suggesting something harmful or evil.  
*Context:* A sinister intention behind hate crimes.
- **Rapprochement** – Re-establishment of friendly relations.  
*Context:* A chance for rapprochement between rival nations.
- **Espoused** – Adopted or supported a cause.  
*Context:* Political ideas espoused by leadership.
- **Imbroglio** – A complex or embarrassing situation.  
*Context:* The Balochistan political imbroglio.
- **Conundrum** – A confusing and difficult issue.  
*Context:* The refugee documentation conundrum.
- **Magnanimity** – Generosity or nobility in forgiving.  
*Context:* A call for political magnanimity.
- **Collateral Damage** – Unintended harm during conflict.  
*Context:* Civilians as collateral damage in crises.
- **Writ** – Legal authority or control.  
*Context:* The state's writ being challenged.
- **Sweltering** – Unbearably hot.  
*Context:* Sweltering weather conditions.
- **Mitigate** – To reduce severity or impact.  
*Context:* Measures to mitigate climate effects.

- **Ostensibly** – Seemingly or apparently.  
*Context:* Ostensibly peaceful but violent protests.
- **Reprisal** – Retaliatory action.  
*Context:* Military reprisals threatened.
- **Stragglers** – People who fall behind.  
*Context:* Stragglers to be deported post-deadline.
- **Misogyny** – Hatred or discrimination against women.  
*Context:* Misogyny in criminal justice outcomes.
- **Chauvinistic** – Excessive or biased support for one's group or gender.  
*Context:* Chauvinistic structures in society.
- **Plummeting** – Falling steeply.  
*Context:* Stock market plummeting due to tariffs.
- **Protectionist** – Favoring trade barriers to protect domestic industry.  
*Context:* Trump's protectionist trade stance.
- **Calibrate** – To adjust precisely.  
*Context:* Calibrate national response to crisis.
- **Perturbing** – Worrisome or disturbing.  
*Context:* Perturbing downgrade in growth forecast.
- **False Flag Operation** – A deceptive action attributed to another.  
*Context:* Alleged false flag operation in Kashmir.
- **Contagion** – Spread of harmful influence or crisis.  
*Context:* Economic contagion due to blockades.
- **Jeopardise** – To put in danger.  
*Context:* Trade disruptions jeopardise livelihoods.
- **Elucidate** – To clarify or explain.  
*Context:* Government elucidated retaliatory actions.
- **Jingoism** – Extreme, aggressive nationalism.  
*Context:* Jingoism fanned by Indian media.
- **Riparian** – Relating to riverbanks or water rights.  
*Context:* Pakistan as a lower riparian state.



- **Deregulate** – To remove government controls.  
*Context:* Deregulate wheat markets to let market work.
- **Prophylaxis** – Preventive medical treatment.  
*Context:* Shortage of rabies prophylaxis reported.
- **Restraint** – Self-control in tense situations.  
*Context:* UN urges restraint between India and Pakistan.
- **Incendiary** – Provocative; likely to cause conflict.  
*Context:* Incendiary rhetoric escalated tensions.
- **Scapegoat** – A person unjustly blamed.  
*Context:* Pakistan made a scapegoat for attack.
- **Hijinks** – Disruptive or exaggerated antics.  
*Context:* Media hijinks harming diplomacy.
- **Aversion** – Strong dislike.  
*Context:* Aversion to media ethics in India.
- **Consensus** – General agreement.  
*Context:* Canal project paused pending provincial consensus.
- **Arbitrary** – Based on random choice or whim.  
*Context:* Decision-making must not be arbitrary.
- **Accomplice** – A person who helps in wrongdoing.  
*Context:* Accomplices in passport fraud must be punished.
- **Exemplary** – Serving as a model or warning.  
*Context:* Exemplary punishment needed for document fraud.
- **Turbulence** – Instability or disorder.  
*Context:* Immunisation efforts face global turbulence.
- **Flagging** – Weakening or declining.  
*Context:* Flagging support for vaccination.
- **Stagnated** – Ceased developing or growing.  
*Context:* Routine immunisation has stagnated.
- **Misinformation** – False or misleading information.  
*Context:* Misinformation fuels vaccine refusal.

- **Cold Chain** – Temperature-controlled supply system.

*Context:* Strengthen cold chain for vaccine delivery.

- **Asinine** – Extremely foolish or stupid.

*Context:* Asinine remarks worsen diplomatic tension.

- **Combative** – Aggressive or confrontational.

*Context:* India's combative posture questioned.

- **De-escalation** – Reduction of tension or conflict.

*Context:* Calls for de-escalation through diplomacy.

- **Intermediation** – Mediation or intervention.

*Context:* Saudi-Iran intermediation offered.

- **Propensity** – Natural tendency or inclination.

*Context:* Propensity for conflict must be curbed.