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Local governance

INTERIOR Minister Mohsin Naqvi's speech at a business summit on Thursday has stirred a hornet's nest. His diagnosis that the present system of governance is collapsing is correct. His call for political parties to sit together and resolve the country's issues is welcome — although it will depend on the extent to which the government is willing to engage opposition parties. His warning that business as usual will neither deliver prosperity, nor create jobs, nor fix governance failures is also timely. But his proposed cure — creating smaller provinces on administrative grounds — rests on the flawed assumption that such an exercise will automatically bring the government closer to citizens and resolve governance problems. This view is questionable. From time to time, different political parties, including the PPP, PML-N and MQM, have advocated new provinces for different reasons. Indeed, there is no harm in having a national debate to see whether a consensus can emerge. But it must be an inclusive, evidence-based and unrushed process, based on genuine and broad public participation. The exercise would require scrutiny inside and outside parliament, with a focus on economic viability, administrative capacity and resource distribution.

While the debate on new provinces should continue, there is a much simpler and more effective option available. The aims of devolution, better governance and administrative efficiency can be achieved by constitutionally guaranteeing the continuity of local governments as the effective third tier of governance at the centre and in the provinces. The issue is the failure to devolve political, administrative and financial authority to the local level, where public services are actually delivered. The problem is, no political party is prepared to empower elected LGs. That must change in order to facilitate decentralisation and good governance for a robust economy. New provinces were not the only governance reform the minister, who is considered close to the security establishment, appeared to advocate. He also, rather slyly, hinted at the 'need' to build support for an alternative system of governance within the democratic dispensation that would replace the existing federal parliamentary system. Given the serious internal and external threats facing the country, those in authority must refrain from making the parliamentary system, on which the nation has broadly agreed, contentious, as doing so would only strengthen divisive forces.

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Murders in Balochistan

GOOD news is scarce in Balochistan. Seven labourers were abducted and gunned down in Turbat city recently. Four belonged to Punjab and two to KP, suggesting that their ethnic background made them targets. Terrorist outfits have not just attacked politicians, activists and jurists, but also innocent non-Baloch workers who travel to the province in search of livelihoods. The killings of citizens must be unequivocally denounced, and the frequency and intensity of such attacks should set off alarm bells across the country and within the security apparatus. What the victims reflect is a deep insecurity driven by conflict and deprivation in the province.

Political disputes, ethnic turmoil and terrorism have left a resource-rich land poor and far behind the rest of Pakistan. Years of neglect, poverty and violence have created a gulf between the people and the state. With a fragile security situation, workers from other provinces often find themselves in a risky situation where varied power dynamics turn them into targets. Labourers across the country, irrespective of where they are working, deserve the same safety, rule of law and justice, and those killed should not become mere statistics. Such atrocities do nothing for Balochistan's cause or for the rightful demands of its people. They simply perpetuate volatility, damage development, prevent investment and create further misery. Violence against ordinary citizens is inexcusable, and the onus is on the provincial authorities to ensure that those responsible are punished in accordance with the law. Beyond heightened security, vigilance and intelligence needs, lasting stability demands that the state assuage the political, economic and governance anxieties that fuel the cycle of violence. Matters have come to such a pass that without easing Balochistan's sense of alienation through a complementary political effort, such tragedies will be hard to prevent. Counterterrorism actions, empathy for the people and dialogue with non-violent elements promise protection for all.

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Maritime alliance

AS the US-Iran war drags on, new battle lines are being drawn. The pro-US Gulf Arab monarchies and Iran have enjoyed a chequered history, specifically after the latter's Islamic Revolution of 1979. But now, in the midst of the current conflict, the Arabs and Iranians are moving dangerously close to direct confrontation.

One manifestation of this is the new maritime defence coalition that Saudi Arabia has just announced. At least 14 countries, among them Pakistan, Egypt and Türkiye, have signed a joint statement supporting the coalition that seeks to "strengthen maritime security" in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandeb strait.

The development comes after the pro-Iran Yemeni Houthi militia announced a blockade of Saudi ports last month. Many saw the Houthi move as an Iranian pressure tactic to complement the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. While Tehran's decision-makers may have sought to hurt the US and its allies with these closures, the truth is that they were affecting the entire international community, including some of Tehran's own allies.

The result is that due to Iran's hard line on Hormuz, and the Houthis' move against the Saudis, Riyadh is developing a defence coalition apparently aimed at Iran and its allies. While Tehran's mistrust of the US and Israel is understandable, its uncompromising posture is alienating many of its neighbours, and isolating it further. Much of the internal situation in Iran is the direct result of the US-Israeli aggression, as the more pragmatic figures have been assassinated, leaving relatively hard-line factions, such as the Pasdaran, to call the shots, especially in foreign policy. Those within the Iranian establishment who believe in maintaining better ties with their neighbours need to prevail on their compatriots, and rethink Tehran's rigid approach.

It is evident that as the Iranians and Arabs move towards open confrontation, Israel is watching on with glee. During the Iran-Iraq war, then Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin was reported to have said that he wished "them both success". One assumes the current Israeli regime has similar feelings towards the Arab-Iran stand-off. The situation demands wisdom and restraint from all sides.

Once this war is over, America may leave, but the Arabs and Iranians have to live in the region. Hence, matters need to be addressed before they spiral out of control. The GCC and other Arab states and Iran must, among themselves, resolve to halt attacks on each other. Moreover, the Arabs should see to it that their soil is not used by foreign aggressors against Iran. Tehran, similarly, should ensure there is free passage for vessels through the region's maritime chokepoints. Unless all sides show statesmanship, an ugly new chapter in this conflict is likely to open.

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Urban flooding

THE warning from the disaster management and weather authorities that a new monsoon spell could trigger urban flooding in major cities across Punjab and Sindh is yet another reminder of how poorly prepared our cities are for heavy rainfall.

Cities from Rawalpindi, Lahore and Multan in Punjab, to Hyderabad, Umerkot and Tando Allahyar in Sindh, have been flagged for urban flooding. This is not unusual during the monsoons. However, what makes this year's warning worth pausing on is the Met Office's forecast of below normal rainfall this year. Still, less rainfall will not eliminate the risk of flooded cities if a burst of rain arrives faster than the ground and drains can carry it away. This says more about the state of our cities than about the weather.

The problem of urban flooding in Pakistan is no longer limited to low-lying neighbourhoods. It has become a structural feature of how the country has grown and urban centres have developed. Unplanned construction has taken place over drainage channels and wetlands that once absorbed rain. Waterways have been encroached upon, storm-water systems are built for outdated rainfall patterns, and drains are choked with solid waste that no longer has any place to go.

The response is reactive across the provinces. Drains are cleared only when the rain starts to fall; pumps arrive after roads are under water; and warnings are issued, repeated, then forgotten until the next spell. This is crisis management dressed up as preparedness. Most Pakistani cities have no comprehensive flood-risk maps, no functioning drainage master plans, and no clear chain of command for who acts first as the water rises. Drainage, roads, water supply and disaster response sit in separate departments that rarely coordinate before a flood and mostly trade blame after one.

Climate change has broken the old planning assumptions. Cities now need infrastructure built for short, intense downpours capable of overwhelming drains within minutes, not the gradual rainfall patterns those systems were designed around decades ago. Every new road, housing scheme or commercial project should be assessed for how it disrupts the natural water flow before approval, not after the damage becomes visible. Existing drains need redesigning and expanding to match current rainfall intensity, rather than being patched up just before the monsoon.

Pakistan cannot control how much rain falls. But it can control the extent to which the rain turns into a disaster. The recent warning is not a new problem; each year, governments assure the public that they are ready for the rains. Unfortunately, the very first intense downpour exposes their claims. What the country needs is sustained investment in drainage infrastructure and local governments to maintain it between the monsoons, not just during the rainy season.

Fatal workplaces

THE methane explosion near Quetta that killed 34 coal miners is the latest entry in Pakistan's long register of preventable workplace deaths. The men were trapped between 760m and 1,200m underground after interconnected mines collapsed; most came from Shangla, and 23 belonged to one village. Some were sons of miners lost in earlier accidents, a cruel inheritance created by poverty and official neglect. An inquiry and Rs500,000 compensation have been announced, but neither answers the central question: why were workers allowed into a mine without safeguards capable of detecting and dispersing methane, ensuring ventilation, maintaining alternative exits and mounting a rapid rescue? The investigation must establish when the mine was last inspected, whether gas monitors worked, what violations had been recorded and who authorised operations. Its findings must be published, and negligence must carry criminal and financial consequences. Otherwise, the familiar ritual will repeat itself: condolences, cheques, a committee, and silence once the graves have been filled.

That ritual is not confined to mining. More than 260 workers died in the Baldia factory fire, where a perilous workplace became a death trap. Twenty-nine workers were killed in the 2016 Gadani shipbreaking inferno, while labourers in stone-crushing units continue to contract fatal silicosis amid weak enforcement and inadequate medical support. Different industries, hazards and provinces; the governing culture is the same. Employers cut costs, inspectors overlook violations, workers desperate for wages accept risks, and the state intervenes only after mass casualties. Pakistan needs more than sector-specific inquiries. Provincial governments must enforce modern occupational safety laws across mines, factories, construction sites, shipbreaking yards and hazardous workshops; register workers and establishments; publish inspection and accident records; and protect labourers who report unsafe conditions. Independent audits should be mandatory for high-risk enterprises, repeat offenders should be closed, and compensation should reflect lost earnings and dependants' needs. Unregistered workers and bereaved families must not be left outside pension, insurance and statutory compensation systems because employers failed to document them. Until preventable deaths cost negligent owners and officials more than compliance would have, our workplaces will remain sites where poverty is exploited and mourning becomes routine.

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Dual standards

IT appears that the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party has fallen foul of the Election Commission of Pakistan. A five-member ECP bench, headed by Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja, has refused to recognise Mehmood Khan Achakzai as PkMAP chairman. The party's last intra-party elections were held in December 2022. Under PkMAP's constitution, the term was for three years, so fresh polls were due by December 2025, and the PkMAP failed in this regard. Fair enough. A party's internal democracy is essential. Leaders who treat their parties as personal fiefdoms undermine the very democracy they claim to champion. PkMAP's failure is, therefore, indefensible on its merits. Yet one cannot help but also consider the merits of the messenger. After all, the CEC's constitutional five-year term expired on Jan 26, 2025. Does the ECP need reminding that Article 215(4) requires vacancies in the offices of CEC and ECP members to be filled within 45 days?

The 26th Amendment had allowed the incumbents to continue until a successor was appointed, but this was intended as a stop-gap measure, not a licence for indefinite tenure. However, neither the CEC nor the other members appear to have felt any moral compulsion to step aside, despite having vastly overstayed their constitutional tenure. The result is that we have an ECP being led by officials who have served well beyond their original tenure while they strictly enforce electoral calendars on political parties. And this is not to mention the many prima facie violations of rules, procedures and laws, including of the Constitution itself, that the ECP has committed. This 'rules for thee but not for me' policy can, therefore, not be taken seriously. Now that Mr Achakzai's notification as Leader of the Opposition has removed one procedural hurdle to fresh appointments in the ECP, the government has no excuse for failing to initiate the consultation process. It is time it appointed fresh faces to the Commission.

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Farewell to arms?

PALESTINIAN resistance group Hamas recently made a major concession by agreeing to give up its weapons. It should be remembered that along with its political activities, the movement has an armed wing dedicated to the liberation of Palestine.

The group's weapons will be surrendered to the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza, the Palestinian technocratic body formed under US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace. In essence, Hamas has thrown the gauntlet to Israel: it is ready to surrender its weapons, but will the Zionist state end its occupation of Gaza? This remains the million-dollar question. Mr Trump was upbeat about the development, saying that Israel was "very happy" about it. However, while there had been no official

reaction from Tel Aviv at the time of writing, most Israeli politicians, including some in the cabinet, have decried the move, calling for the destruction of Hamas.

It will be interesting to see whether Israel honours its end of the deal and vacates occupied Palestinian territory in Gaza. Going by past precedent, the Israelis are not known for keeping their word. Also, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces an election in October, and there is widespread anti-Palestinian sentiment amongst the electorate.

ut the Israeli leader may not want to annoy the American president by appearing to sabotage Mr Trump's Gaza peace plan. Lest we forget, Israel has murdered over 73,000 Palestinians — more than 21,000 of them children — since the Oct 7, 2023 attacks, and while its killing spree has lessened in intensity, it has not stopped completely since the ceasefire came into effect last year. Moreover, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains appalling.

It should be kept in mind that Hamas and other Palestinian groups have continued their armed struggle against Israel because the Zionist state has closed all avenues of peacefully resolving the Palestine question. Almost the entire Israeli political class is opposed to a Palestinian state, illegal settlements continue to proliferate, and Gaza — which even before the 2023 attacks was virtually under siege — lies in ruins. Meanwhile, Israeli provocations against Al Aqsa have not stopped.

If this situation is to change, there must be a clear pathway for a Palestinian state, an end to Israeli brutalities against the Arab population, and complete withdrawal from all occupied territories. Knowing the current political climate in Israel, this is asking for the moon. However, Mr Trump, who sees himself as a 'peacemaker', and his BoP must press Israel to at least start the process by withdrawing from Gaza, and allowing unimpeded humanitarian assistance into the Strip.

If Tel Aviv does not leave Gaza, it will show the world that it is not serious about peace, and is committed to the occupation of Palestine and to the extermination of the Palestinian people.

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Unplanned future

A PROJECTION that Pakistan's population could reach 400m by 2040 should not be treated as another dramatic number to be quoted at ceremonies and forgotten by the next budget. It is a warning about the size of the state's future obligations. Every additional child will need vaccination, nutrition, schooling, safe water, transport and, eventually, work. Yet the present system already fails millions on each count. The issue, therefore, is not that families are having children irresponsibly while the government looks on helplessly. It is that the state has never made voluntary family planning a dependable part of primary healthcare. Advice is sporadic, contraceptive supplies run out, trained staff are unevenly distributed, and women often cannot seek reproductive care without cost, distance, stigma or male permission obstructing them. Speeches about 'individual responsibility' ring hollow when the practical means of exercising that responsibility is unreliable.

The government's new national council can matter only if it converts alarm into measurable provincial action. Family planning must be available through every Basic Health Unit, maternity service and postnatal visit, with a range of safe methods, proper counselling and follow-up care. It must reach young couples and remote communities. Men must be addressed directly rather than leaving contraception to women who often have the least authority in the family. Lady Health Workers need supplies, training and protection from political neglect; districts lacking contraceptive access should receive priority resources; and contraceptive shortages, maternal deaths and unintended pregnancies should become performance indicators. The \$2m in reproductive-health assistance from China and UNFPA is welcome, but donations cannot substitute for a permanent domestic budget and functioning procurement system. Above all, population policy must remain rooted in consent and dignity. Coercive targets will punish the poor, deepen mistrust and drive women away from healthcare. The convincing case for smaller, well-spaced families is not bureaucratic control but better survival, health and opportunity for mothers and children. Pakistan does not lack councils or policy documents. It lacks continuity between announcement and delivery. A population of 400m is not inevitable; it is the possible outcome of another 14 years in which contraception remains harder to find than government warnings. Our future population will be shaped less by speeches and more by whether family planning is available at the nearest clinic.

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No more torture

EVEN the best laws on the books are worth little unless the state shows the willingness to enforce them. This is certainly true for the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2022. As the HRCP pointed out during a recent consultation in Islamabad, torture and cruel and inhuman treatment remain widespread in Pakistan, despite the existence of this law. Perhaps the main reason for this is the thana culture that, despite multiple attempts at reform, continues to influence law enforcement in the country. This culture is a holdover from the colonial age during which LEAs were not supposed to serve and protect citizens, but to dominate them and put them in their place when they stepped out of line. The result is the continuation of a system where torture is endemic and rights are trampled on. Studies show that most confessions are extracted under torture. However, these brutish methods have failed to bring down crime numbers, as the rampant lawlessness across the country shows. The FIA told the Lahore High Court earlier this year that up till April 30, it had registered at least 364 inquiries under the anti-torture law. The vast majority of cases were reported from Punjab.

As speakers at the HRCP event noted, torture persists because of weak implementation, inadequate safeguards and a lack of accountability. At the root of the matter lies the need to revamp the criminal justice system. From police to prosecution, there is a need to sensitise public servants about fundamental rights, and replace archaic, violent and illegal methods with scientific techniques of investigation. The judiciary, elected representatives and the police hierarchy across the provinces must work together to reform the criminal justice system. This is imperative not because donors want reforms, but because the dignity of man, as underscored by the Constitution, must be upheld.

Swat bombing

IT is a bitter irony that terrorists struck a protest against violence in Swat on Sunday, causing at least 17 fatalities. Both policemen and civilians were martyred in the atrocity.

Reports indicate that a suicide bomber blew himself up near a police station as the anti-terror protest was underway when officers tried to search him. Some media outlets have said the banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the bombing.

This bloodbath should lead to thorough counterterrorism action, as the people of Swat — and indeed the rest of KP — deserve to live in an atmosphere free of terrorism and violence.

Unfortunately, as pointed out in an exclusive report published in this paper, gaps in training have left LEAs in KP vulnerable to ‘double-tap’ or ‘two-stage’ attacks by terrorists. Moreover, the casualty numbers from July, and the first half of 2026, indicate that a fresh CT strategy is needed to bring down the number of fatalities, and effectively neutralise the threat of terrorism.

The fact is that terrorists appear to be operating without fear of consequences, while LEAs are unable to stay ahead of them. A string of recent 'two-stage' attacks in KP illustrate this point.

The terrorists' modus operandi involves attacking security facilities, waiting for reinforcements to arrive, and then staging secondary attacks. A number of security personnel have been martyred in these attacks.

Police officials say forces lack the training to counter these attacks, while experts also question how terrorists are able to maintain their supply lines. The gaps in training need to be filled so that security forces are able to defend themselves, gain the upper hand over violent elements, and, through better intelligence, break up their networks and thwart their attacks.

At present, the terrorism figures, particularly in Balochistan and KP, do not paint a reassuring picture. According to the PICSS think tank, there were over 600 fatalities in July. While the vast majority was of terrorists, over 200 security men, civilians and peace committee members were martyred last month. Balochistan saw the highest levels of violence, while KP was not far behind.

Overall, in the first six months of 2026, Pakistan has witnessed over 900 fatalities involving LEAs and civilians. This is far too high a toll, and the state needs to urgently refine its CT strategy to prevent further loss of precious lives.

It is a matter of great concern that despite the martyrdom of so many policemen and soldiers, as well as civilians, the state is unable to vanquish the monster of terrorism. Hostile external forces may indeed be creating problems, but as security experts point out, we have failed to secure spaces within our borders where terrorists operate from. This continuous bloodbath must end so that people can live in peace.

Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2026

Tariff blow

FOR an export sector already squeezed by high production costs, the additional 10pc tariff on top of the existing 29pc on Pakistan's shipments to the US comes at the worst possible moment for the country's textile and apparel industry. The new import tax imposed by the US trade representative late last month, after a review linked to enforcement of forced-labour prohibitions across Washington's trading partners, risks eroding Pakistan's competitiveness in the American market. Pakistan prohibits forced labour by law, but the US wants stricter enforcement. Textiles and apparel account for most of Pakistan's exports to the US. Facing high energy prices, expensive financing,

taxes and logistic costs, the textiles and apparel industry fears its buyers could turn to lower-cost suppliers from regional competitors. The new duty is estimated to cost the sector \$564m in export revenue this fiscal year.

The new tariffs come amid growing discussion of stronger commercial ties between Islamabad and Washington. Pakistan is also increasing imports of oil and other commodities from the US, a move meant to narrow the bilateral trade gap in favour of America. But that cannot be mistaken for protection. Even the recent improvement in diplomatic relations between the two has failed to shield Pakistan's exports from additional tariffs — that should be seen as a warning. The new duties are a reminder that diplomacy alone cannot offset hard trade policy. If Pakistan wants to increase its share in the US market on stable terms, it must show that compliance and enforcement are functioning systems. It cannot rely on goodwill alone, nor can it afford complacency at home. The immediate priority should be to reduce the cost of production through cheaper and more reliable energy, easier access to finance and improvements in logistics. That must be paired with serious enforcement of labour standards and a more proactive case before US regulators and buyers. Washington must also recognise that punitive duties on a labour-intensive economy can deepen hardship without necessarily changing supply-chain behaviour. The long-term answer is diversification. Pakistan should push beyond dependence on low-margin textile and apparel exports, move up the value chain and broaden its export markets. A stronger industrial base, not diplomatic optics, will determine whether it can sustain its presence in global trade.

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Perilous peaks

THE deaths of 10 climbers in an avalanche on Broad Peak is a sad reminder of the perils that many mountaineers face in their quest to scale the tallest peaks. Among the latest victims was Nepal's Nirmal Purja, the first person to summit the world's 14 8,000m peaks and the Seven Summits — the highest mountains in each of the seven continents — both with and without supplemental oxygen. Purja's body was found three days after the avalanche on the 8,051m Broad Peak. In fact, Nepal is mourning the loss of one of the most accomplished generation of mountaineers it has produced. In total, it mourned six deaths in the tragedy, the others being Pur Bahadur Gurung, Kili Pemba Sherpa, Nima Sherpa, Nawang Thendu Sherpa and Gyaljen Sherpa. Pakistani climber Sohail Sakhi was also part of the ill-fated 10-member expedition. Others included Nathira Al Harthy of Oman, American Mallory Geis and China's Wang Zhong. When the avalanche struck on Thursday, theirs was the only expedition on Broad Peak that had stayed behind after the others had retreated due to heavy snowfall. Pakistan immediately launched a search-and-rescue mission after contact was lost, with army helicopters scouring the area. But all hopes were dashed on Friday when the bodies of two climbers were discovered.

Inclement weather made matters difficult for the rescuers. Three more bodies were found on Saturday, including Purja's.

In recent years, Pakistan has seen an uptick in the number of climbers who dare to scale its challenging peaks. However, the remoteness of the region makes it difficult to launch rescue missions. The deaths on Broad Peak are a painful reminder of all that these climbers had put on the line to scale the world's tallest peaks. More importantly, they reflect the courage and devotion of these men and women who aspire to reach heights that only a few in the world have attained. That is their way of living out their passion and doing things beyond the ordinary.

Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2026

hed in Dawn, August 3rd, 2026

State of confusion

FROM the looks of it, America has no exit strategy to extricate itself from the disastrous war with Iran. US President Donald Trump has alternated between issuing bombastic threats to the Iranians, to claiming that peace was at hand, sometimes making a sharp U-turn within hours. This is not how responsible statecraft plays out.

In the past, he had threatened to destroy Iranian civilisation, while more recently he said the US was ready to use "Military Terror ... not seen since World War II" against the Islamic Republic. In his latest pronouncement, the US leader has given Iran a "last chance" to choose between a "deal [or] total surrender". The five-month-old war has shown that the Iranians have mostly remained unfazed by Mr Trump's threats.

The chaos at the White House is understandable. Mr Trump jumped headfirst into the war on Feb 28 at Israel's persuasion, without doing his homework. Perhaps if he had studied the mistakes his predecessors had made in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, he would have refrained from launching a new war. But the US leader is not known for deep reflection, not even on critical issues.

There are reports — officially denied by Washington — that the US is running low on key munitions, while many of America's top generals have warned their bosses that there are no longer many good military options available. As per one report, Centcom has solicited, via email, "new creative and unconventional ways to ... punish Iran", from defence experts. In plain speak, there is policy chaos in Washington. Moreover, there are reports that the Saudis have asked the US to give diplomacy with Iran another try. Riyadh realises that immense destruction will engulf the region should another round of hostilities break out.

It is very difficult for leaders to admit they are wrong. But it is crucial for Mr Trump to realise that Operation 'Epic Fury' has been an epic failure. The US has achieved none of its objectives. Iran evidently retains its nuclear capabilities; it has pledged to continue supporting its regional armed allies; and its control over the Strait of Hormuz has only increased since the war began. In addition, the American and Israeli dream of regime change has completely backfired: the pragmatic old guard — assassinated by the US and Israel — has been replaced by an ideologically driven and much more hard-line new leadership.

From this point on, the US should shun its violent rhetoric and approach the Iranians with respect. Pakistan, which Iran has identified as a key mediator, can press on with its efforts to revive the Islamabad MoU. If it decides to continue with more threats, Washington will only sink deeper into the Iran quagmire, as the hard-liners in the Islamic Republic's establishment seem determined to fight on.

Published in Dawn, August 5th, 2026

Pension decision

THE government's decision to formally operationalise the new Defined Contribution Pension Fund Scheme is a step towards addressing one of the federal budget's fastest growing liabilities. Signing agreements with fund managers regulated under the Voluntary Pension System Rules gives the scheme institutional cover it previously lacked. For government employees who fall under this framework, it should mean more predictable, professionally managed retirement savings, backed by a mandatory insurance component covering death and disability risk that the old defined-benefit system did not offer. The design carries discipline. Employees cannot access their pension account before retirement, and even then face a 25pc cap on lump-sum withdrawal, with the remainder invested for at least 20 years or until death. Portability between fund managers should keep returns competitive rather than captive.

None of this changes the existing pension problem facing the federal budget for at least a generation. The scheme applies only to employees appointed on or after July 1, 2024; everyone hired before that date remains on the unfunded pension, and federal pension expenditure is still projected at Rs1.17tr for 2026-27, up from Rs1.05tr the year before. The reform will not visibly ease this burden until the current workforce retires in significant numbers — a two- to three-decade horizon. Until then, the government carries the legacy pension bill alongside the new scheme's 12pc employer contribution, meaning no near-term fiscal relief is on offer. The eventual inclusion of the armed forces is also important given that military pensions account for roughly Rs860bn of this year's bill, compared with

Rs300bn for civilian employees. The scheme, initially expected to begin last July, has been delayed amid consultations and security considerations. These concerns merit due thought, but a broader transition to a sustainable pension framework remains essential. Over time, extending the reform across the public sector would help contain the growing burden on the budget. The transition must therefore be viewed as the beginning of a longer process rather than a complete solution. Without such a transition, the state will continue to carry a growing legacy burden alongside new pension commitments. The objective should be to ensure that pension reform eventually delivers meaningful fiscal savings while preserving reasonable retirement security for public servants.

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Preventable deaths

THE deaths of 144 children from measles and diphtheria in Karachi during the first seven months of the year expose a grave failure of routine immunisation. That failure is evident in the large number of children who receive their earliest vaccines but are never brought back for the doses needed to complete their protection. Officials may cite a decline in reported cases, but that offers little comfort when hospitals continue to record such a devastating toll. The steep drop in vaccination coverage after birth is especially troubling: many children receive initial doses but miss later ones, leaving them only partially protected. Parents must take responsibility for completing vaccination schedules, but the state cannot reduce the crisis to parental negligence. Missed doses also reflect weak follow-up, poor counselling, misinformation, shortages of trained staff and uneven access in low-income and informal settlements. Healthcare providers share responsibility too. Every consultation with a child should include a check of immunisation status, counselling for caregivers and, where appropriate, administration of missed doses.

The response must move beyond occasional campaigns. Sindh needs a reliable digital immunisation register linked to birth records, with reminders before each dose and follow-up when appointments are missed. Mobile teams should regularly visit low-coverage neighbourhoods, while schools, clinics and hospitals should be required to verify vaccination records. Area-wise coverage and mortality data must be published so that gaps can be identified and district officials held accountable. Each vaccine-preventable death should be investigated to determine whether the failure involved access, misinformation, delayed referral or poor treatment. Community health workers, teachers and religious leaders should be enlisted to counter myths, while vaccine stocks, diphtheria antitoxin and referral systems must remain dependable. Above all, the government should treat routine immunisation as a permanent door-to-door public service rather than an emergency exercise launched after outbreaks.

Automobile concerns

PAKISTAN'S automobile industry is at a critical juncture. Sharp cuts in tariffs on the import of completely built vehicles in the current budget, risk weakening the domestic auto manufacturing base. The issue is whether policymakers want to strengthen local auto engineering or cede the market to imports. Consumers deserve lower prices but through greater local competition, and not policies that weaken industrial development. With assembly plants operating below capacity and parts manufacturers struggling, abrupt liberalisation would weaken the domestic automotive value chain. Local manufacturing depends on economies of scale, ongoing investment in technology, and predictable policy. Successful automotive hubs in Asia nurtured domestic production with carefully sequenced protection, while demanding greater localisation and higher quality standards.

We should adopt a similar approach. A stable, long-term auto policy can reassure investors while linking tariff protection to measurable performance. Assemblers should be required to deepen localisation, invest in R&D, improve quality and expand exports in return for continued protection. Such a strategy would strengthen the vendor industry, create skilled employment and reduce dependence on imported parts. There is also the issue of incentives. The government's willingness to provide tax relief for hybrid and plug-in hybrid vehicles — too costly for ordinary households — raises concerns. Cleaner transport is a worthy aim but incentives should not disproportionately benefit buyers of premium hybrid vehicles, while middle-income families are priced out of the market. A balanced approach would direct fiscal support towards small, locally assembled cars. Such steps would stimulate demand where it matters most, increase production, boost local auto vendors and generate jobs across the manufacturing chain. They would also complement environmental goals by encouraging the replacement of older, less efficient vehicles with modern, lower-emission alternatives. Industrial policy is ultimately about choosing where scarce public resources deliver the greatest long-term return.

ublished in Dawn, August 6th, 2026

Bad press

THE government's move to impose restrictions on international media will not only alienate the foreign press, it will also hamper the state's own efforts to improve Pakistan's image abroad. To recall, the government recently mandated that anyone working for foreign media must now seek a no-objection certificate if they wish to report from anywhere apart from Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. These new rules, named in typically Orwellian fashion the 'Foreign Media Facilitation Guidelines', supposedly "provide an administrative mechanism" for verification, coordination and facilitating access to foreign publications, according to the government. However, given the latter's unforgiving

reaction to a recent foreign media report on the polls in Azad Kashmir, which seems to have catalysed their formulation, it is clear that ‘facilitation’ is not quite what these rules are meant to achieve.

The rules require “foreign media houses, organisations and outlets working in Pakistan and all eligible journalists, media owners, media professionals, sources, freelancers, sponsors, fixers, attached persons, assignees etc, of Pakistan working or contributing for them” to seek accreditation and registration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Additionally, any Pakistani organisation or individual working with or facilitating foreign media “in any capacity” is also required to register with the ministry’s External Publicity Wing. Buried within the rules is a provision that accreditation may be suspended or withdrawn if a journalist is judged to have acted against the country’s ideology, sovereignty, security or public order. This exposes Pakistani journalists, fixers, translators and drivers who work with foreign journalists to possible retribution if the state does not like what international media publishes. What is the need for all this? Misinformation is answered with facts, and the state has no shortage of them at its disposal. With rules like these, the government is only making itself look like the villain in the eyes of the press. The guidelines must be withdrawn, or at the very least stripped of the NOC requirement and open-ended grounds for cancelling accreditation. A country that can be reported on only by permission will simply be reported on from a distance, by people forced to rely on second-hand accounts and harbouring an uncharitable view of the country’s leadership. The picture that will emerge will be less flattering; and the government will have no one but itself to blame for it. GeographicReference

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Growth denied

THE Sindh government's agreement with the World Bank to combine health, nutrition, sanitation, social protection and agriculture programmes acknowledges that child stunting cannot be treated by the health department alone. The proposed secretariat, district committees and dashboard could replace scattered schemes with targets and accountability. But institutional architecture will mean little unless it reaches mothers and children consistently. More than 40pc of Pakistani children under five are stunted, while Unicef estimates that nearly 10m children are affected. This is not simply a shortage of food. Repeated infections, unsafe water, poor sanitation, maternal undernutrition, inadequate breastfeeding, low-quality diets, poverty and limited primary healthcare all impair growth during pregnancy and the first two years of life. The damage can reduce learning, health and earning capacity for decades.

Sindh's model should therefore become part of a national, provincially implemented strategy centred on the first 1,000 days of life. Every pregnant woman should have access to antenatal care, micronutrient supplementation, nutrition counselling and income support; every child should be tracked for growth, vaccination and timely treatment

through strengthened basic health units and Lady Health Workers. Governments must promote exclusive breastfeeding, improve complementary feeding after six months and expand fortification of staple foods. Cash transfers should be linked to health visits without penalising families unable to reach distant facilities. Safe drinking water, toilets, drainage and water-quality testing must be treated as nutrition spending, not separate municipal concerns. District plans should identify the highest-burden union councils, publish budgets and quarterly results, and trigger corrective action when targets are missed. Independent surveys must verify official dashboards. Longer-term progress also requires girls' education, family planning, and affordable eggs, milk, pulses, fruit and vegetables. Pakistan has run nutrition projects for years; what it has lacked is sustained political ownership, reliable local delivery and consequences for failure. Sindh now has a framework. Its value will be measured not by meetings, but by children growing, learning and thriving.

Published in Dawn, August 7th, 2026

Mineral wealth

GROWING American interest in Pakistan's critical minerals is no longer speculative. According to US diplomats, American companies are actively examining several mineral projects here as part of Washington's push to diversify mineral supply chains away from China. That interest has already produced a \$500m agreement between the two countries and approval of \$1.3bn in US financing for Reko Diq. For Pakistan, the opportunity extends beyond capital inflows. Its mineral wealth can attract new technologies, diversify exports and generate employment. That outcome depends on treating these resources as long-term national assets rather than items to be signed away in closed rooms. The experience of Reko Diq offers an important lesson. Years of legal disputes and policy reversals imposed enormous costs on Pakistan. While the project has since been revived, the controversy demonstrated the consequences of weak governance, lack of transparency and poor contract management. Any future agreements involving critical minerals must therefore be subjected to rigorous legal, financial and technical scrutiny.

Transparency should be the guiding principle. The terms of any contract, its fiscal implications and obligations should be placed before parliament. Such openness would strengthen investor confidence by demonstrating that agreements enjoy political legitimacy and are less vulnerable to future disputes or policy reversals. Also important is the role of local communities. Most of the country's mineral deposits lie in some of its least developed regions, where residents have long complained that natural resources are extracted while poverty persists. Any investment framework must ensure that local

populations become major stakeholders through employment, skills development, infrastructure, social investment and economic benefits. Without local ownership, even commercially viable projects may struggle. That said, the government must not rush into agreements simply because American firms have shown interest in its critical minerals. Contracts signed today will shape the nation's economic future for years. Therefore, Islamabad should also actively court Chinese firms with extensive expertise and technological capabilities across the entire critical minerals value chain rather than relying on US firms alone. A competition between Chinese and US investors can ultimately work in Pakistan's favour, attracting better commercial terms, and encouraging higher standards of technology transfer and value addition.

Published in Dawn, August 7th, 2026

Terrorist havens

DESPITE the use of both carrots and sticks by the international community, the Afghan Taliban refuse to cut their ties to terrorist groups such as the TTP. This poses a particular problem to Afghanistan's neighbours, including Pakistan, which has borne the brunt of terrorist violence ever since the Taliban's return to Kabul in 2021.

Both KP and Balochistan are currently in the grip of violent insurgencies, with the elements responsible for the bloodshed finding safe havens in Afghanistan. Pakistan raised the issue at the UN Security Council on Wednesday, with this country's permanent representative highlighting the "increasingly permissive environment" for terrorist groups in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. He urged the Taliban to fulfil their obligations and ensure Afghan soil is not used against neighbouring states. China's representative at the same forum echoed these concerns, urging the Taliban to take action, whilst supporting Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. The Chinese diplomat also called for sanctions on the BLA and Majeed Brigade.

These issues have been raised repeatedly, while UNSC monitoring reports have endorsed Pakistan's concerns regarding the permissive environment for terrorist groups in Afghanistan. It is not just the TTP; Al Qaeda, IS-K, ETIM and others are all believed to be active in Afghanistan. While the Taliban are opposed to IS-K, they have deep links with other violent actors. Moreover, nearly all of Afghanistan's neighbours have complained of the threat these outfits pose to their security.

Yet the Taliban only pay lip service to these concerns, denying the fact that terrorists operate from their territory. These denials are implausible as there is a convincing body

of evidence proving that violent outfits operate in an agreeable atmosphere in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

As this paper has argued before, a regional response is required to tackle the problem of Afghanistan-based terrorist groups. The Afghan Taliban are an unpalatable reality and cannot be wished away. The challenge for the international community is to use a combination of deterrence and incentives to make them change their tune. Pakistan has tried kinetic methods to deter cross-border terrorism, but in the long term, continued hostilities are not sustainable.

The economic situation in Afghanistan is dire, and its people live in misery. Instead of protecting their terrorist comrades, the Taliban need to think about improving the lives of common Afghans. This can only happen through trade and regional integration. Yet Afghanistan will remain a pariah if its rulers keep harbouring terrorists. Therefore, Kabul's neighbours need to continue diplomatic, political and, where needed, kinetic efforts to end the 'export' of terrorism from Afghanistan, both for its own development, and regional peace.

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Flawed investigations

THE botched case of a young Karachi businessman, Mir Raza Ali, who died under suspicious circumstances, took a new turn recently when his parents alleged kidnapping, torture and murder, while the police, at least initially, leaned towards suicide. The police surgeon questioned the post-mortem report on television; the deceased's father filed a plea seeking exhumation of the body and the constitution of a medico-legal board. A day after the court's permission, exhumation was postponed after the family objected to the sudden reconstitution of the board.

Regrettably, reports submitted by medico-legal surgeons have been disputed with disturbing regularity in the country. Criminal cases rest on their findings. Any loopholes can bury justice for victims and their kin. Yet, not only have these assessments often been flawed, pressure is exercised to have the evidence altered. An inaccurate record of a victim's wounds hinders the dispensation of justice. Medical examiners in such a critical area cannot cut corners. Moreover, forensic personnel in the country often falter in reconstructing the physical attributes of offenders or victims, and find it difficult to recreate a crime scene accurately. In Pakistan, many of them barely meet the minimum qualification for the task. Evidence-gathering should be strengthened by organised databanks in all the provinces to facilitate speedy collation. Meanwhile, specialised education should be ensured for all police officers involved in investigations and medico-legal cases. All big hospitals should have their own forensic units. Health experts have long demanded modernised medico-legal services with advanced verification methods,

upgraded apparatus and enhanced techniques. Post-mortem reports, or medico-legal certificates determine the course of investigation and prosecution. Flawed documentation shields criminals and punishes the innocent. Systemic reform needs political commitment. The government is not oblivious to the faults in our system. It must commit to closing the gap.

Published in Dawn, August 8th, 2026

Israeli impunity

ANY hope that Hamas's decision to disarm would lead to a breakthrough has been dashed for one simple reason: Israeli impunity. Tel Aviv has reacted to the Palestinian group's announcement by saying it would not withdraw from Gaza until there was 'genuine' disarmament. What this actually means is that Israel has no intention of ending the occupation. Frustration at the Zionist state's intransigence has been expressed by eight Muslim states, including Pakistan, that recently issued a statement condemning Tel Aviv's violence in Gaza. Israeli attacks on health facilities and civilian targets were particularly highlighted in the statement, whose signatories include Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Türkiye. According to Unicef, Israel has killed 300 children over the last 300 days. Such a 'ceasefire', the UN agency said, "is failing children". Meanwhile, the situation in the occupied West Bank is not any better, with violent settler attacks continuing. The settler community in Israel is known for its extremism and use of violence against Arab civilians. They aim to uproot the Palestinians from their ancestral lands and cement the occupation. While the Israeli state claims to investigate such attacks, this means little when rabid supporters of the settler movement sit in the cabinet. The statement by Muslim states also highlighted the situation in the West Bank.

The Muslim states have urged the UN Security Council to compel Israel to fulfil its obligations. This is wishful thinking, because if the UN and the international community had played their role, there would have been no campaign of extermination in Gaza, and the tens of thousands of Palestinians murdered by Israel since 2023 would have been alive today. If the Muslim world wants to end the carnage in Gaza and the West Bank, it must take practical steps against Israel, such as a diplomatic and trade boycott. Resolutions and condemnations will not save the Palestinians from Israeli terror. Moreover, President Donald Trump's Board of Peace must be asked what it aims to do to make Israel honour the Gaza peace deal. It is clear that Tel Aviv does not intend to stop its murderous campaign in the Strip. The Palestinians have been making concessions for peace. It is now time Israel's Western benefactors asked it to put its money where its mouth is.

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Danger ahead

PAKISTAN has already paid a heavy human price this monsoon, even as another dangerous spell approaches. NDMA figures covering June 26 to Aug 7 record 151 deaths — 73 of them children — and 448 injuries, besides damage to more than 1,200 houses and dozens of bridges and kilometres of roads.

Chitral shows how quickly such destruction multiplies into other emergencies. Glofs, cloudbursts and flash floods have washed away bridges and severed roads, leaving communities unable to reach healthcare. Attendance at Lower Chitral's district headquarters hospital has fallen by around 55pc, while patients from some isolated villages have stopped arriving altogether.

Doctors are already reporting gastroenteritis and dysentery and fear outbreaks of typhoid and malaria. Pregnant women unable to reach hospitals face particular danger, while post-traumatic stress is emerging among disaster-hit communities. The situation shows us how extreme weather kills not only through torrents and collapsing homes, but also by cutting people off from medicines, clean water and timely treatment.

NDMA, Rescue 1122, district administrations and the National Highway Authority have been involved in evacuations, relief distribution and restoration work. But each disaster exposes the distance between issuing warnings and protecting people. Chitral residents have complained of slow road clearance, delaying access to villages where medical needs are mounting. Warning equipment in parts of KP has previously been damaged or stolen, pointing to weaknesses in maintenance and local ownership.

District authorities must know which settlements require evacuation, where residents will be taken, how alerts will get to people without mobile connectivity and how food, medicines and medical teams will reach communities. Such plans must be prepared before an emergency, not improvised after valleys are cut off. Medical camps, safe-water points and emergency stocks should be positioned in vulnerable valleys.

There is particular urgency now. PMD's Aug 7 outlook warns of moderate to heavy rainfall over the upper catchments of all major rivers from Aug 10 to 13, including KP, GB, Azad Kashmir, Islamabad and upper Punjab, with river and tributary flows expected to rise. Authorities should use this window to pre-position heavy machinery, boats, temporary bridges, fuel, food, drinking water, medicines and mobile clinics. Pregnant women, elderly people and patients requiring regular treatment should be identified for early evacuation, while alternative communication systems must be ready where conventional networks

may fail. Shelters should be accessible and evacuation routes communicated before conditions deteriorate.

Pakistan cannot control the monsoon or the instability of its glaciers. But it can control how seriously it acts on warnings. With the warning already given, the task now is to ensure that the next spell does not deepen an already heavy human toll.

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FIFA controversy

FIFA PRESIDENT Gianni Infantino is at the centre of a storm of his own making. Even after a crisis meeting in Morocco, where Mr Infantino received support from the FIFA management to continue as president and issued an apology for his controversial plan to sell stakes to private investors to run the World Cup, there is discontent. European football's governing body UEFA has categorically said it has lost confidence in him, while the Norwegian Football Association has demanded Mr Infantino's resignation. But there is still support for him from Africa's football body CAF. Mexico, Argentina and Qatar have also backed the beleaguered Mr Infantino's continuation as FIFA chief as he seeks re-election for a fourth and final term next year. Two weeks ago, it seemed he would be re-elected unopposed. But his proposal to sell a \$4.2bn stake in a new \$20bn commercial subsidiary — the FIFA Forward Enterprise — that would run major football events, and his push to have it approved by the 211 FIFA member associations, led to an unprecedented backlash. That proposal came with the caveat of increased funding, of up to \$40m, for member associations — an amount large enough to sway votes in his favour, especially those of the smaller members — but it was shelved after UEFA's rallying call saw the Asian Football Confederation as well as the North and Central American body CONCACAF join the opposition.

It has been a humiliating climb-down for Mr Infantino, whose senior adviser Carlos Cordeiro resigned in protest, while FIFA's chief operating officer Kevin Lamour stated that the staff felt deceived by the plan. But he is clinging on to power even as UEFA has threatened to boycott FIFA events. When the US launched a corruption investigation into FIFA in 2015, it vowed it would reform the football body. But Mr Infantino's brazen use of his position to push for what was essentially the sale of the World Cup shows that FIFA is far from reformed.

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Conflicting priorities

THERE is a reasonable argument that the democratic process must go on regardless of prevailing conditions; that powering through adversity is what makes systems stronger. At the same time, it must be said that the recent elections in Azad Kashmir really should have been planned and conducted better. The AJK Election Commission recently announced that the third and final phase of general elections in the territory, scheduled for Aug 10 across the entire Poonch division, will now be held only in Bagh and Haveli. Of the division's 11 constituencies, only four will elect leaders to the AJK Assembly this Monday. Polling in the other seven was deferred after the home secretary reported law-and-order concerns following the July 27 clashes between police and the banned Joint Awami Action Committee in Rawalakot, which resulted in multiple casualties. No new date for the suspended polls has been announced, and it now seems that those areas may go without representation in the AJK legislature for the foreseeable future.

It was a controversial move to announce the election results piecemeal rather than after the exercise concluded in all constituencies. It now seems as though the authorities had anticipated that the election would not be completed. It is hoped that a new assembly will not be constituted and a government sworn in while seven constituencies sit unrepresented, with no date for their enfranchisement. As it is, rigging complaints have been coming not from a defeated outsider but from a partner in the ruling coalition at the centre. That alone makes it difficult not to view the exercise with considerable trepidation. The PML-N is claiming it will form the AJK government despite the polls not being complete, and it will find it difficult to shrug off the impression that this was the intention all along. But the process can still be salvaged. Given where things stand, the restive parts of AJK may stabilise quicker if they are governed by a House they have elected themselves. The election commission should give a new poll date for the deferred constituencies immediately, rather than wait until conditions are deemed "conducive". It is also important that no government is sworn in at Muzaffarabad until every seat has been properly contested. It is essential that the political process march on, but it cannot leave any citizen behind.

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Makkah agreement

IN the midst of a gruelling war between the US and Iran — currently at a stalemate — the signing of the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkiye on Friday is a highly symbolic development.

It comes at a time when the American defence umbrella has proved of little help in protecting Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states. Rather, the presence of US military assets in these states has pulled them into the war, as the Iranians and their regional armed allies target these facilities.

Seen in this context, many questions swirl around the new defence agreement, specifically the fact that it considers an attack against one signatory to be an attack against all.

The prime minister, the Saudi crown prince and the Turkish president were all upbeat about the new pact. PM Shehbaz Sharif termed it “historic”, while President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said it is open to “friendly nations”.

This is not an ‘Islamic Nato’. Moreover, similar alliances have been attempted before, such as the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition founded in 2015 and headed by former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif. The latter alliance is not linked to any major operations.

Pakistani-Saudi defence collaboration goes back decades, and the current pact only solidifies the arrangement, while also bringing Turkiye on board. But the question in many minds is what role the pact will play vis-à-vis Iran.

A Saudi deputy minister has said the agreement “does not represent an effort to establish a military axis or a sectarian bloc”. This clarification is welcome. On the other hand, an adviser to Iran’s supreme leader has said that more cooperation among regional states “can secure its security”.

If the US-Iran war remains unresolved and major hostilities erupt again, the new alliance will be put to the test, especially if Tehran resumes attacks on the pro-America GCC states.

Suffice it to say, such alliances should work to reduce tensions between Muslims states, and not be used against any Muslim country.

The US has shown it is uninterested in protecting its Gulf allies, even though the latter have purchased billions of dollars' worth of weaponry from it. Instead of depending on the US or other foreign powers for security, regional states — indeed all OIC members — should pledge to refrain from aggression against each other.

Iran should stop attacking the GCC states, while the Gulf sheikhdoms should stop foreign forces from using their soil against Iran. The Arabs and the Iranians cannot change their geography; they have to live side by side; hence it would be best if they worked out a modus vivendi for mutual security.

Hopefully, the new defence agreement can promote unity within the Muslim world, instead of adding to the existing fissures.

Published in Dawn, August 9th, 2026

HIV crisis

PAKISTAN's presence among countries with the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in Asia is a matter of shame. Globally, the virus is found in drug addicts, sex workers and other high-risk sections. What makes our crisis more distressing is the victims' profile: children and low-risk groups who have been infected because of a broken healthcare system. Sindh's health department has said that the necessary measures were in place to curb HIV's spread, including 44 antiretroviral therapy centres in the province. Meanwhile, a Senate committee wants the complete findings of the Sindh Healthcare Commission's inspection of Karachi's Valika Hospital, where nearly 100 children tested positive for HIV

due to reused syringes, infected vials and unsafe transfusions. The findings will help the authorities decide whether the facility, one of the many hospitals operating without a SHCC licence, deserves a permit.

Hospital fiascos here surface with troubling regularity on the same pattern as the 2019 Ratodero eruption. According to reports, the number of children who have contracted HIV through unsafe medical care is 7,500. Overall, 25,000 people are believed to have died after being infected by the virus. Poor diagnosis delays treatment. Immediate action should involve the screening of exposed people, counselling and lifelong antiretroviral therapy. The privacy of all carriers must be maintained, with compensation for transmissions caused by healthcare lapses. Aggressive steps should include regular hospital spot checks, blood-screening guidelines, steady stocks of auto-reusable syringes, and suspension of licences of erring medical outlets. The spread of HIV is a full-blown national emergency that demands comprehensive, sustained healthcare reform. Staunch political will and a cohesive social response are vital to containing this preventable virus. Hospitals cannot become incubators of disease. Public trust is the first casualty of systems that, instead of curing patients, expose them to danger.

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Failed by the state

THE 1,914 cases of child abuse across Pakistan in the first six months of 2026 should spark outrage. The figure works out to more than 10 cases a day, and even that is only what appeared in newspapers monitored by Sahil. Of the total, 1,015 involved child sexual abuse, 558 abduction, 101 missing children, 35 child marriages and 98 pornography linked to sexual abuse. Forty-nine infants were found abandoned on the roadside. Girls accounted for 58pc of victims, though boys constituted 59pc of the pornography-linked cases. Children aged 11 to 15 were the largest group, with 598 victims, followed by 356 aged 16 to 18 and 329 aged six to 10. In 487 cases, the child's age was not reported. But the most disturbing numbers concern who commits the abuse. In 43pc of cases the alleged abuser was an acquaintance, while 45pc of incidents took place in the victim's own home. The recent Qayyumabad case in Karachi, involving the alleged rape and murder of a toddler by a teenage relative living with the family, provides a chilling context.

The danger is often embedded in familiar relationships where children should be safest.
GeographicReference

There is little comfort in the fact that the overall tally is marginally lower than the 1,956 cases recorded in the same period in 2025. A small fall cannot be confused with progress, particularly when Sahil's method captures only cases that reach the press. Nor can these figures tell us conclusively whether abuse itself is rising or reporting has improved. What they do establish is persistent failure. Punjab alone accounts for 80pc of reported cases, and all 10 districts identified by Sahil as the most vulnerable are in the province. Meanwhile, 89pc of cases were registered with police. That is welcome, but an FIR is not a child protection policy. Registration comes after the damage is done. The state's task is prevention — functioning child-protection authorities, trained police and social workers, safe schools and neighbourhoods, swift prosecution and reporting systems that children can trust. Pakistan has no shortage of laws and departments in this respect, nor any lack of condemnatory statements after each atrocity. What it does not have is evidence that these mechanisms are keeping its children safe. When hundreds of children can be abused, abducted, exploited or abandoned in six months, the state cannot take comfort in recording the crime. It should be made to answer for failing to prevent it.

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Genuine governance

ON the surface, the Punjab cabinet's decision to allocate funds for local government elections is a welcome step towards restoring a democratic tier of governance that has remained absent for more than four years — in fact, for much longer in practical terms.

After years of premature dissolution, court-mandated reinstatement, repeated delays and legal and administrative manoeuvring, the allocation suggests that Punjab is finally preparing to hold polls that were constitutionally due by April 2022. The timing, however, is difficult to ignore.

The announcement comes only days after the interior minister, with the public endorsement of DG ISPR, argued that creating new provinces or administrative units could improve governance. The sudden will to revive LGs may well be aimed at demonstrating that devolution to the grassroots can improve governance and that LGs offer an alternative to redrawing provincial boundaries as proposed by certain quarters.

That argument would have carried weight had Punjab chosen to establish a genuinely empowered LG system. Unfortunately, it has done the opposite. The existing Punjab LG law is devolution only in name. While it provides for elected councils, it concentrates meaningful administrative and financial authority in the hands of the provincial government and bureaucracy, making elected local representatives dependent on the goodwill of officials for even routine decisions.

Such an arrangement defeats the very purpose of LGs, which is to bring decision-making closer to the citizens. Punjab's legislation compares unfavourably even with that of other provinces where LGs enjoy relatively greater governance space. The country's largest province has opted for perhaps the most centralised model of local governance.

The experience of the past six decades illustrates why merely holding elections is not enough. Successive governments have dissolved local bodies and amended or replaced LG laws at their whim. Thus a constitutional obligation has been repeatedly ignored and grassroots democracy treated as an optional exercise rather than a permanent feature of governance. Meaningful devolution requires much more than elected councillors.

A truly functional third tier of government must have constitutionally protected administrative and financial autonomy. LGs should be able to raise, allocate and spend resources without provincial interference. The local bureaucracy and police should be accountable to elected local representatives rather than exclusively to the province. Without such authority, elected councils are little more than advisory bodies with limited capacity to address citizens' issues.

The governance challenges of Punjab — and of other provinces — stem from the excessive centralisation of power. Holding polls under a law that denies genuine autonomy to LGs may satisfy a constitutional formality. But it will not resolve the governance deficit that has fuelled demands for more provinces to improve governance.

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Abandoned after floods

THREE years after the 2022 floods submerged a third of Pakistan, more than 134,000 verified affected families in Balochistan who lost their homes have learnt that the state does not intend to rebuild for all of them. The committee overseeing a World Bank-funded project has capped the housing component at roughly 69,000 units and redirected the rest of the \$400m programme towards roads and irrigation. Consequently, the lender has withdrawn the \$180m in additional financing that could have completed the job. A prime ministerial promise of 'resilient' housing for every family that lost a home has ended up as a line item that has been quietly reassigned. The official policy has now confirmed that roughly half will stay without shelter. SouthAsians & Diaspora

A report in this paper suggests that 15,000 completed houses reported to the PM bore no relation to the 8,694 in the official record. An inquiry found misrepresentation, though accounts differ on who inflated the figures and why. The Planning Commission says housing funds were wrongly diverted there from health, education and irrigation to begin with, and that this is a correction. Others say that money is, instead, being pulled from the neediest component towards contractor-driven infrastructure. Both cannot be entirely true. What is certain is that the families affected have no say in the dispute. The commission cites 75,000 houses under construction and 26,000 completed — figures that sit uneasily against its own 68,922-unit cap. The Economic Affairs Division has flagged the World Bank's unease over changes in project leadership as even the ministries coordinating this effort are not aligned. The fact-finding committee ordered to investigate has already been denied access to records in Balochistan — which itself should count as evidence. The comparison with Sindh's relatively successful flood-housing programme only sharpens the indictment. Differences in financing do not explain why Pakistan's most neglected province is also the one where promises of reconstruction prove most negotiable.

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Tel Aviv's subterfuge

THE Gaza peace plan championed by US President Donald Trump and his Board of Peace has encountered major turbulence, as the American leader's Israeli friends have rejected the deal. On Sunday, the Israeli prime minister, after a cabinet meeting, said his military would not withdraw from Gaza until Hamas is "genuinely disarmed".

These verbal gymnastics indicate that Tel Aviv has no intention of ending its occupation of the Strip. Hamas had agreed to surrender its weapons to a Palestinian committee last month, and the disarmament process and Israeli withdrawal were supposed to take place in tandem. Trump had then said the development was "monumental". It seems his Israeli allies do not share his enthusiasm. Israel does not play by the rules, and shifts the goalposts when things are not going its way. Hamas says it remains committed to the plan.

From the Nakba to the Oslo Accords to the present day, it is the Arab side that has been expected to make all the compromises, while Israel is treated like a spoilt child and given whatever it wants by its powerful Western supporters whenever it throws a tantrum. Its rejection of the Trumpian peace plan is the latest example of this hypocrisy.

Trump does not like to take no for an answer. But both in Gaza and Lebanon, the Israelis have been constantly sabotaging his attempts to end hostilities. Will the American leader put pressure on Tel Aviv to honour its pledges vis-à-vis Gaza? The excuse that Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu will not want to be seen giving concessions to the Palestinians before the Zionist state's October elections is flimsy. Peace and rehabilitation in Gaza cannot be held hostage to internal Israeli politics.

Israeli provocations and oppression had created the grounds for the last two Intifadas, as well as the October 2023 Hamas attacks. When Tel Aviv cuts off all avenues for peaceful resolution of the dispute, and commits to never accepting an independent Palestinian state, then violence will be the unfortunate outcome, as the Arabs resist by any means necessary. Sadly, it appears that Israel thrives in an atmosphere of violence, and is uninterested in peace. This is the reality unless it changes its tune on the Gaza peace plan.

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Equal citizens

AUG 11 occupies a special place in our history because it was on this day in 1947 that Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah set out what citizenship in the new state ought to mean. Addressing the Constituent Assembly, he spoke of a country in which people were free to go to their temples, mosques or other places of worship, and where religion, caste or creed would not determine their standing before the state.

He insisted that citizens should enjoy equal rights, privileges and obligations, and that discrimination between communities had no place in the order Pakistan was attempting to build. These remarks formed part of a wider vision of government based on law, impartiality, protection of life and property, and the safeguarding of religious belief. SouthAsians & Diaspora

It is fitting, then, that minority rights activists will gather outside Mazar-i-Quaid in Karachi today to recall that promise and demand that it be honoured. The Minority Rights March has put forward 11 demands, including stronger safeguards against forced conversions, protection from the misuse of blasphemy laws, greater political representation, removal of discriminatory material from textbooks, protection of minority properties and places of worship, and expanded access to education and employment.

Organisers have also called for constitutional amendments allowing non-Muslim citizens to qualify for the offices of president and prime minister. Whether every demand commands consensus is a matter for democratic debate. But the principle from which they proceed — that citizenship should not be graded according to faith — should not be controversial in a republic that continues to invoke Jinnah as its founding authority. The delay in a written NOC for the march deserves attention. Peaceful assembly is a right, not a favour.

The gap between Jinnah's principle of equal citizenship and present realities cannot be ignored. It is especially troubling because these protections were articulated at the birth of Pakistan itself. Religious minorities continue to face mob violence, attacks on their places of worship, forced conversions and social and economic exclusion.

Laws intended to protect religion have at times been weaponised through false accusations, with consequences extending far beyond the courtroom. Even where the state guarantees equality, social prejudice and institutional barriers make that guarantee fragile in practice. National Minority Rights Day must be more than a ceremonial observance.

It should prompt the state to examine where law, policy and public culture continue to fall short of the standard articulated on Aug 11, 1947. Jinnah did not ask minorities to be grateful for protection; he described equal citizenship as a fundamental principle. Pakistan

cannot honour that principle through speeches alone. It will honour it when every citizen, regardless of faith, can claim the same dignity, security and political belonging.

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Housing deficit

THE federal cabinet's zoning directive has the potential to be the most consequential decision in the redefinition of urban housing in Pakistan, provided the provinces also implement it. For decades, our haphazard urban expansion has followed a costly pattern. Housing societies have spread across farmland on the edges of cities more as investment opportunities than to meet actual housing demand. The result: an uncontrolled sprawl without a corresponding reduction in the housing deficit. This model has diverted capital into land banking while consuming farmland around cities and pushing food inflation. For a country facing food insecurity, water stress and climate vulnerability, treating fertile land as an inexhaustible urban reserve makes no economic sense. If enforced, the decision to link the national housing policy with zoning compliance and vertical construction could prove a departure from the existing land-intensive model that has so far shaped our cities.

The logic is simple. Horizontal expansion consumes new land for every additional tranche of housing. Vertical development can accommodate several times as many families on the same footprint while preserving farmland. But vertical construction needs enforceable zoning, density standards, building and energy-efficiency codes, and adequate infrastructure. Unless the provinces enforce these rules and provide proper services, the federal housing policy will remain largely advisory. The deficit is estimated at more than 10m units, while population growth and urbanisation need close to another million annually. We cannot meet that requirement by pushing housing societies into the countryside. We need to build more homes on less land. However, supply is only half the problem. The other is affordability. The government should connect zoning, vertical construction and mortgage affordability into a single housing strategy. The aim should not be to build more housing societies, but more homes in the right places and at affordable prices, while protecting the land on which our food security depends.

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Nutrition emergency

MALNUTRITION has become one of the biggest obstacles to Pakistan's development. Around 40pc of children under five are stunted, a figure that should trouble us not only because of what it says about child health, but because of what it means for the country's future. Children who do not get the nutrition they need in their earliest years are more likely to struggle with learning, health and productivity later in life. The damage can follow them into adulthood and, in many cases, into the next generation. Pakistan is also estimated to lose nearly \$17bn every year because of malnutrition and undernutrition. That makes it an economic and development problem as well. DawnMedia's Act for Nutrition conference, to be held in Islamabad next month, seeks to bring that broader understanding into the national conversation. This is important because stunting does not have a single cause. A family may not be able to afford nutritious food. A child may repeatedly fall ill because of unsafe water or poor sanitation. A mother may not receive proper nutrition or healthcare during pregnancy. Weak primary healthcare, poor feeding practices, poverty and rapid population growth can all reinforce the same cycle.

The harder question is what happens after the discussion ends. Pakistan has had nutrition programmes and official commitments before, but progress has remained far too slow. The response has to be practical and sustained. Mothers need better nutrition and antenatal support. Families need access to clean water, sanitation and reliable primary healthcare. Breastfeeding support, micronutrient supplementation, food fortification and regular growth monitoring must reach communities consistently rather than through scattered initiatives. Social protection programmes should also do more to identify and assist mothers and children who are most at risk. Just as importantly, governments need to know where they are failing. District-level nutrition data should be published regularly and used to direct resources where needed most. Conferences are important as they bring officials, doctors, economists, development partners and civil society together, but the real measure of success will be what follows: clear responsibilities, adequate funding and results that can be tracked. Pakistan has discussed malnutrition for years. What is needed now is the persistence to treat it as the national development challenge it already is.

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Mideast outreach

OVER the past few days, Pakistan has been going the extra mile to assure Iran that the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement it signed last week with Saudi Arabia and Turkiye poses no threat to Tehran.

In a recent telephone call, Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar told his Iranian counterpart Abbas Araghchi that the pact is “not an instrument of confrontation”. Moreover, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif told the cabinet that the agreement is “entirely for defence purposes”.

Tehran seems to have understood the messaging, as the Iranian foreign ministry spokesman said his country had no reason to believe the pact was aimed at encircling it, and that it showed that countries of the region could not depend on the American security umbrella.

Perhaps the reason for speculation surrounding the deal was the mutual defence component, which says that an attack on one signatory is an attack on all. Considering the targeting of US military assets in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states by Iran during the active phase of hostilities with America, observers have debated whether the signatories of the deal could step in militarily. However, the clarifications regarding Iran are welcome. In fact, what is needed is a new regional security architecture that binds the Arabs, Iranians and other states together.

Achieving this would be difficult, considering the pro-America stance of the GCC states. However, the American military footprint in the Gulf and larger Middle East may eventually shrink, which means that regional states will have to eventually work out a security framework amongst themselves. The Makkah pact could provide a blueprint for such defence cooperation. The Turkish president has already said that the pact is open to other countries.

If Iran were to be brought on board, it could significantly alter the regional security landscape. For this to happen, the existing high levels of mistrust between the Arabs, particularly Saudi Arabia, and the Iranians, would need to be reduced. But states such as Pakistan and Turkiye, which maintain cordial ties with both sides, can attempt to bridge

the gap. As a CBM, Iran should open up the Strait of Hormuz, as its continued closure is battering Gulf economies. The Arab states should also pledge to disallow outsiders from staging aggression against Iran from their soil.

Instead of depending on extra-regional powers, the states of the Gulf and Middle East must themselves create a new security architecture. Not only would this reduce the tensions that exist between them, it could also serve as an expanded defence pact to deter Israel from attacking regional states. Tel Aviv has attacked Iran and its allies, as well as pro-America states like Qatar, hence an effective regional defensive bloc could make Israel think twice about its violent adventurism.

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Denied a future

FIVE years after the Taliban returned to Kabul, the world is still issuing statements while a generation of Afghan girls is being erased from classrooms and public life. Unesco now says 2.4m girls have been denied secondary education, 200,000 more than last year. The number could rise to 4m by 2030. Afghanistan remains the only country where girls and women are barred from secondary and higher education. The cruelty extends to universities, many jobs, parks, gyms and public life. It is a systematic attempt to make half a population invisible. Yet the response from the UN, powerful capitals and institutions built to defend human rights has become a ritual of condemnation without consequence. Resolutions, reports and expressions of 'deep concern' cannot educate a child. If these bodies possess moral authority, this is where it must be exercised.

The West, above all the US, cannot pretend Afghanistan is somebody else's problem. Washington led a war there for 20 years, spent blood and treasure 'remaking' the Afghan state, and repeatedly invoked the rights of Afghan women as evidence of progress before exiting in August 2021 as that state collapsed and the Taliban swept back into power. Whatever the arguments for ending an endless war, departure did not erase responsibility for those left behind. Nor should the passage of time normalise Taliban repression. The US, EU, UN Security Council, Muslim-majority states and Afghanistan's neighbours should coordinate pressure. They must deny diplomatic legitimacy, preserve targeted sanctions, condition concessions on measurable restoration of women's rights, expand scholarships and remote-learning pathways, fund Afghan women-led organisations and protect humanitarian aid from political bargaining. Countries with influence over the Taliban must actually use it. Afghan girls were encouraged for two decades to believe that classrooms, careers and public life belonged to them. The world cannot now watch those doors being bolted shut and call its helplessness diplomacy.

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Food costs

THE State Bank's warning that domestic food prices could rise more than expected in the near term deserves urgent attention. In its biannual monetary policy report, the bank

rightly points out that recent food inflation is no longer being generated only at home. It is increasingly being driven by forces beyond Pakistan's control, particularly through energy, fertiliser and freight costs. The transmission mechanism is straightforward. The war in the region and disruptions to gas supplies from the Gulf are pushing up global energy and fertiliser prices. Both feed directly into the cost of cultivation and the transportation of food to markets. The shock travels from global energy markets to farm inputs and eventually to the price of food. By the time it reaches the market, it is already beyond the means of many households. More importantly, the country is exposed to both higher energy and fertiliser costs as well as a widening food trade deficit caused by weakening agricultural exports. This further reduces the foreign exchange earnings needed to finance an expensive food import bill.

The external shock is exposing vulnerabilities that have plagued the agriculture sector for several decades. The country's irrigation system is inefficient and poorly modernised. Water losses are substantial, storage capacity is inadequate and crop choices remain concentrated in water-intensive staples. Farm productivity has not kept pace with population growth and climate volatility. Smallholder farmers are particularly exposed as they have limited capacity to absorb sudden increases in fertiliser, fuel or transport costs. A poor harvest or input-price shock can quickly become a debt problem for most. Climate variability compounds the difficulty. The possibility of an El Niño event next year, flagged by the SBP, complicates the food inflation outlook. With 46pc of the population reportedly facing hunger-like conditions, complacency is a luxury we cannot afford. Food inflation is not merely another component of the consumer price index. It has direct implications for poverty, nutrition and human capital. Pakistan cannot prevent regional wars or determine global energy prices. It can, however, reduce the extent to which an external energy shock becomes a domestic food crisis. The SBP has issued a warning. Policymakers must now act before the next external shock exposes the same weaknesses again.

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AJK outlook

AS the staggered polls for the AJK Legislative Assembly enter their final stretch, it appears that the PML-N is in a commanding position, and is already working on a governance plan for the region.

Marred by violence as well as allegations of rigging by the PPP — the PML-N's coalition partner at the centre — these polls have not been without controversy. Re-polling will be held at some polling stations in Bagh over the weekend, while votes will be cast in seven constituencies of Poonch division on Aug 20 or Aug 21. Polling was postponed in these constituencies due to the volatile law and order situation.

The AJK polls have exposed a widening gap between the PML-N and PPP, with the latter claiming that the AJK Election Commission had not ensured transparent polling. PML-N leaders, however, have downplayed these concerns, saying that their party head Nawaz Sharif will choose the next AJK prime minister. While the PML-N's lead looks unassailable at this point, as we have stated before, government formation should only commence when polling has concluded in all constituencies. Furthermore, the election commission should thoroughly investigate all claims of electoral irregularities, as a controversial voting exercise will cast a long shadow over the next administration, putting its legitimacy into question.

While it is important for elections to be held even in the most difficult of circumstances, unless the polls are seen to be free and fair, the underlying problems fuelling public disaffection will become more severe. AJK has seen anti-government protests off and on for the past three years. Led by the now banned Joint Awami Action Committee, the protests picked up momentum in June this year.

There is no doubt that the violence associated with these protests and the incendiary rhetoric of some JAAC leaders are indefensible. But the protest movement itself cannot be brushed aside. True, some of the JAAC's demands, such as the removal of refugee seats, concern constitutional matters, which cannot be settled through street power; these issues must be decided within the AJK legislature. But at the root of the protests of the last few years is a demand for good governance.

Unless elections are seen to be fair, and the next administration tries to resolve the protesters' legitimate demands, political unrest in AJK is likely to continue, despite polls being held there. PML-N leaders have said the protesters' "valid demands" will be addressed. Considering the sensitivity of the region, the electoral process must be marked by transparency so that there is general acceptance of the outcome. If the PML-N does take up the reins in Muzaffarabad, it must reach out to the PPP and other political

players in the region, as well as peaceful protesters, to address all concerns in a democratic fashion.

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Jail improvements

THE Punjab government is spending Rs5bn on modernising jail facilities in the province, but to what end? The provincial home department's shopping list is quite something to behold: reportedly, more than 12,000 modern cameras are to be installed in Punjab's prisons, as well as "615 panic buttons, 1,525 public address systems, 369 body cameras, 615 walkie-talkie systems and 41 X-ray body scanners [...] In addition, 82 under-vehicle surveillance systems and 787 facial recognition access devices will also be installed". Armed with all this equipment, the jail authorities will monitor entry and exit points, offices, barracks, security walls, kitchens, hospitals and libraries. This upgradation exercise, expected to be completed by March 2027, is supposed to make Punjab's jails 'better'. But how? It is worth recalling that Punjab's prisons are some of the most overcrowded in the country. Will any of this expenditure contribute towards making conditions more humane in those facilities?

It is worth highlighting here that in Punjab's overcrowded jails, about three-quarters of the prison population comprises undertrial prisoners; in other words, individuals suffering endlessly from the deprivation of their civil liberties without being found guilty of any crime. There are also thousands of women, and hundreds of juveniles and infants accompanying their incarcerated mothers. Health issues are rampant, with a high incidence of hepatitis, HIV and diabetes reported in the past. The mental health of prisoners is underserved, and there usually are not enough doctors to cater to the burgeoning population. While the Punjab government has, to its credit, other commendable initiatives to improve prison conditions as well, it would have been better if it continued to focus on improving conditions for prisoners instead of spending so much money on turning its jails into even more dystopian places than they already are. More than the facilities, it is the people housed in them that need the authorities' care and compassion.

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Job policy for youth

STRIPPED of its rhetoric, the prime minister's announcement of Pakistan's first National Youth Employment Policy is nothing more than hollow promises. While long on aspirations, the announcement is short on details. For starters, how does the government intend to create employment for millions when the economy itself is struggling? How does it plan to raise women's participation in the labour force to 35pc? What exactly does a '10pc quota' for start-ups mean? Is the government promising to procure from young technology companies, reserve financing for them and allocate public contracts or simply encourage entrepreneurship? Is the policy about technology-based businesses, conventional small enterprises or self-employment? Explanations matter because the youth problem is fundamentally an economic one. Without answers, the announcement remains closer to political rhetoric than a workable policy.

Pakistan has a rapidly growing working-age population entering a labour market that is failing to absorb it. The government cannot solve this problem through public-sector recruitment. Its capacity to create jobs is severely constrained by fiscal pressures, a bloated public payroll and the need to contain expenditure. Hence, the private sector has to be the principal engine of growth and employment. However, for most of the years under the current political leadership, the economy has been trapped in survival mode. Macroeconomic stabilisation has understandably dominated policymaking. Domestic investors remain cautious, while foreign investment has remained far below what Pakistan needs to expand productive capacity and create employment at scale. Stabilisation cannot produce enough jobs, which is causing unease among various stakeholders. A federal minister recently described the economy as being in survival mode and told a business audience that laptops cannot be a substitute for jobs, an obvious jab at the PM's signature youth initiative. Freebies cannot substitute for an economy capable of employing people. The real test of a youth employment policy, therefore, should not be the number of laptops distributed, students trained or start-ups announced. It should be the pace of economic growth and the number of sustainable private sector jobs created. That requires the government to address the harder questions of reforms to make manufacturing, exports, technology, agriculture and services expand rapidly enough to absorb new workers. No job strategy can succeed in an economy constrained by low productivity and sluggish growth.

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Taliban support

THE latest UN monitoring report analysing the activities of several transnational terrorist groups is unequivocal in its assessment: the Afghan Taliban “have continued their support” to the banned TTP.

Though the report says that the regime in Kabul has taken some tepid steps to control its TTP comrades, this is clearly not enough, as the continuing reign of terror orchestrated by the TTP in Pakistan shows. Moreover, the document also confirms that Taliban-ruled Afghanistan remains a safe haven for a number of lethal terrorist groups, posing a grave security challenge to regional countries.

These outfits include IS-K, Al Qaeda — which includes AQIS, its Indian subcontinent arm — and ETIM. The report says that IS-K poses the biggest threat to both the Taliban regime and the broader region, despite suffering setbacks due to the kinetic action taken by Pakistan as well as Kabul.

Some parts of the report deserve particular attention. For example, it says that IS-K and the banned BLA may be collaborating. Moreover, the TTP has apparently expanded its operations to Balochistan, Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Al Qaeda has also solidified its support to the TTP, while AQIS, through the Ittehadul Mujahideen Pakistan, has stepped up its terrorist attacks in this country. Beyond Pakistan-centric groups, ETIM is active in the Wakhan corridor, which poses a direct threat to China. These findings indicate that the TTP is looking to broaden its geographical reach, while AQIS is also expanding its violent footprint.

The UN report says that the Kabul regime has taken some steps to try and control the TTP. These include relocating around 2,000 terrorists and their dependants away from the Pakistan border. Moreover, it says that Afghan Taliban supremo Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada has “warned the TTP leadership ... to halt attacks targeting Pakistan” or risk

losing the Taliban's support. These warnings appear to have fallen on deaf ears, as the TTP has not scaled back its bloody campaign.

The fact is that ending the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan will take more than cosmetic steps and lukewarm warnings. If the Taliban regime wants to be taken seriously it needs to take across-the-board action against all terrorist groups on Afghan soil. They cannot pick and choose — for example, fighting IS-K but facilitating the TTP and AQIS. As we have argued earlier on these pages, a multilateral approach is required to address Afghanistan's terrorism problem.

The groups active on Afghan soil pose a threat to the entire region, not just Pakistan. Therefore, all of Afghanistan's neighbours must send the same message to the Taliban: end support for terrorist groups. If they cooperate they can be integrated into the region; if not, the Kabul regime must be shunned by regional states until it changes its ways.

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Lethal celebrations

IT is a familiar tale. Every year, occasions for national celebration turn into fear and mourning just because some citizens feel they are beyond the reach of the law. Each year, instead of expressing happiness and joy in a civilised manner, a number of citizens discharge deadly firearms into the air, putting the lives of others at risk. Whatever combination of negligence and disregard for collective safety drives this behaviour, the results are predictable and preventable. This year, the toll by the evening of Independence Day was at least 94 injured and two dead in Karachi alone. The city's police and law-enforcement authorities are directly to blame. Despite this being a yearly occurrence, they have still failed to develop an effective deterrent strategy or adequately protect citizens. The systemic failure is clear: law enforcement either lacks the commitment or the resources to enforce existing laws with consistency. The city's institutional neglect has created an environment in which those willing to discharge firearms during national celebrations face minimal consequences.

Exemplary punishments and a zero-tolerance policy for discharging firearms, especially on national days, would serve as a strong deterrent. The police could also enlist citizen support; by requesting residents to report aerial firing incidents through police helplines, action could be swiftly taken against those openly flouting the law. There is no shortage of ideas or practical solutions. What is missing is the will to implement them. Until the state demonstrates that the law applies to everyone, and that pulling a trigger in a crowded city carries a lasting cost, these scenes will be repeated. The dead and injured of this Independence Day deserve more than the ritual expressions of concern that follow every such tragedy. Karachi needs intervention from a leadership willing to act — consistently and without fear or favour. Anything less is a tacit admission that the lives lost to this senseless practice simply do not count.

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Sailors' killing

THE killing of at least three Pakistani sailors in an apparent Houthi attack targeting a vessel in the waters of Bab al-Mandeb and the strong reaction from the state, illustrate the combustible situation at this volatile chokepoint. Unless all sides, particularly the Houthis, show restraint, the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb maritime corridors can become the site of greater hostilities, mirroring the situation in the Strait of Hormuz. The attack took place on Aug 11, and the Yemeni government has held the Houthis responsible for it. However, the Iran-allied armed group, which controls much of Yemen, has not claimed the attack. This is uncharacteristic — the Houthis are rarely shy of accepting responsibility for such strikes, as they seek to enforce an embargo on Saudi vessels. The response from Pakistan has been very strong, with the foreign minister and Foreign Office condemning the killings. Pakistan has also raised the issue at the UN. In fact, Pakistan says that — as part of the Saudi-led maritime alliance to secure the Red Sea and its environs — it is “ready and willing” to assist Riyadh in protecting maritime traffic.

It is essential that a fresh round of hostilities be prevented in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb area. In this regard, the Houthis must act with prudence and refrain from hampering marine traffic and targeting vessels. If more countries are dragged into the violence as their sailors and ships are targeted, there is a very real possibility that matters will spiral out of control. And this would open up another front, pitting the pro-Iran Houthis

against the Saudis and their allies. Along with further rattling energy markets and global commerce, such an exchange of fire in this unstable region can broaden the existing sectarian and ideological divisions within the Muslim world. It is therefore essential to establish peace within Yemen, while also restoring the Saudi-Houthi ceasefire. As Pakistan's UN representative said, a "Yemeni-led and Yemeni-owned political process" is the only viable path, while regional states can offer their good offices to try and bring Riyadh and the Houthis to an understanding. The Saudis should consider ending the blockade of Yemen, while the Houthis must also end their attacks on the kingdom's territory and its ships. Short of this, matters will only escalate. BrowseIslamic Supplies

Published in Dawn, August 15th, 2026

Governance test

EVER since the interior minister called for smaller administrative units to improve governance, the question of new provinces has become the subject of much discussion. The proposal has revived a long-standing debate: does Pakistan need more provinces or greater devolution to the local level?

A recent discussion in Islamabad on the topic brought together politicians, policymakers, technocrats and civil society representatives. While some participants supported the creation of new provinces, the broader sentiment appeared to favour, and rightly so, the decentralisation of political, administrative and financial power through effective local governments.

The case for smaller provinces rests on the view that large administrative units have become unwieldy due to racing population numbers and the concentration of authority in a few urban centres. Proponents of this view argue that smaller provinces will bring governance closer to citizens and address the challenges. Yet even they recognise that any restructuring must reflect the will of the people and follow the constitutional process. This is vital to ensure that boundary changes do not become an exercise in political engineering, but emerge from genuine public demand.

However, Pakistan's problem is less a shortage of provinces than excessive centralisation of every kind of power. Without empowered LGs and devolved resources, creating new provinces will not improve governance. The more immediate task should be to make LGs genuinely functional. After all, citizens turn most often to elected representatives over basic issues such as roads, streets, sewerage and other necessary municipal services.

These are the challenges that should be addressed at the local level. Sadly, because of the political ambitions of the ruling elite, LGs in Pakistan have intentionally been denied adequate administrative and financial powers. The outcome is a distorted structure in which provincial governments perform functions that should be handled much closer to the citizens. This results in political patronage, administrative congestion and poor service delivery.

The debate therefore rightly widened the reform agenda. Judicial and electoral reforms, intra-party democracy, the rule of law and institutional behaviour cannot be separated from the question of good governance. As some participants noted, changing boundaries without reforming the underlying political and institutional culture will only lead to the same governance failures.

New provinces may, where there is genuine public demand and a sound administrative and fiscal case, form part of a broader governance restructuring. But the first test is whether power is actually transferred to the citizens. We need governments that are closer to the people, more accountable and financially empowered. The aim should not be to redraw Pakistan's map. It should be to redraw the relationship between the state and its citizens.

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In choppy waters

MORE than three months after Somali pirates captured an oil tanker carrying a multinational crew, including 11 Pakistanis, a safe return is still not in the offing. Fresh video footage shows stranded captives appealing to the government to negotiate with their captors “before it is too late”. Many are sick, and there is no access to medicine. Initially, Pakistan relied on a third party for updates. The Foreign Office recently stated that their release was “complicated and difficult”. New directives from the foreign minister emphasise consistent coordination, together with consolidated domestic and international diplomatic engagement to rescue the sailors. The lack of progress on the matter is very disheartening.

Ship owners often opt for flag vessels from countries that have scant or no regard for labour rights — and Pakistan is emerging as an appropriate choice. Accountability from official authorities and ship owners for the prolonged turmoil faced by the stranded mariners — along with adequate compensation for their families — should have long been instituted. A tracking dashboard operating in conflict-ridden waters to ensure navigational security and swift emergency responses is nowhere in sight. We forget that seafarers form the spine of global trade. Labour rights advocates must compel ship owners and other stakeholders to refrain from coercing sailors to venture into troubled waters. The future challenge for labour rights bodies involves empowering mariners to exercise their right to decline high-risk journeys without any consequences. For now, time is of the essence. Security agencies and the government must put in place a cogent international strategy and recognise the need for naval intervention. Unfortunately, official complacency conveys how dispensable ordinary citizens have become. That feeling will only change if actions are more effective. The well-being of every Pakistani must take precedence over any other state or global concern.

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Tax scheme

THE Hyderabad SITE Association of Trade and Industry has formally endorsed new measures introduced to ease regularisation of businesses, and urged local shopkeepers and traders to register with the FBR. It is not often that the private sector takes initiative in this regard. Registration will allow eligible retailers to avail themselves of FBR’s new

Fixed Tax Asaan Scheme, introduced a few months ago to encourage unregistered businesses to enter the formal tax system. Under the scheme, eligible retailers with an annual turnover of up to Rs200m will pay a fixed tax of 1pc of gross turnover, subject to a minimum annual payment of Rs25,000. The scheme, introduced after the failure of the Tajir Dost Scheme, has been tailored to recommendations laid down after extensive consultations between the government and traders. It is, therefore, incumbent on the latter to use the opportunity to improve compliance.

Attempt after attempt to get retailers to register with the tax authorities has failed to deliver the desired results. Meanwhile, the taxman has placed a disproportionate burden on the documented economy, with the salaried sector alone contributing far more in income tax than the amount collected from retailers through relevant withholding taxes. According to provisional FBR tax figures for the last fiscal, income tax deducted from salaried individuals was Rs633bn, compared to about Rs70bn collected from retailers under two relevant withholding tax provisions. That imbalance has placed an unfair burden on those already within the documented economy, while allowing significant economic activity outside the tax net to remain undertaxed. This fiscal year, the government must enforce compliance consistently and fairly. The fiscal space it has available has been restricted for far too long because of lobbyists and pressure groups. It is commendable that trade leaders are now championing the Fixed Tax Scheme themselves, but if compliance remains low, the government must act. The new arrangement must not become another means of protecting one politically influential constituency from scrutiny while those already within the documented economy continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of the tax burden. The government has offered traders an easier route into the tax system; they must now reciprocate by registering and declaring their actual turnover, while the state must ensure that the rules are applied to everyone.

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Balochistan's wounds

ALTHOUGH Balochistan has been experiencing varying degrees of tumult for over two decades now, currently, the troubled province is witnessing near-constant terrorist activity and lawlessness. The rulers in both Islamabad and Quetta often downplay the situation, but there are moments when they themselves admit that all is not well in Balochistan.

For instance, on Friday, when the nation was celebrating Independence Day, the province's Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti extended an olive branch to those engaged in violence. Mr Bugti advised the lawless elements to "return to the national mainstream" and talk to the government. However, he added, and rightly so, that the state would not talk to those who were involved in the killing of innocent people.

In recent times, terrorist activity in Balochistan has become noticeably brazen. While ordinary citizens and security personnel are often targeted, even the high-level guardians of the state are not safe. On Friday, Balochistan Home Minister Ziaullah Langove's convoy came under attack as he was returning to Quetta from Kalat. The minister survived the ambush, but a number of personnel who were accompanying him were wounded in the attack.

Elsewhere, security forces have not yet given clearance for repair work on a gas pipeline that was blown up by the terrorists. The latter's act of sabotage has deprived several towns of gas.

While the chief minister has once again invited 'angry' elements for talks, the state has yet to create conducive conditions for dialogue to get off the ground. At this point, some introspection is required: the state has alienated even those political elements in Baloch society that have been peacefully pursuing their rights.

This attitude must change. In the short term, a genuine process of reconciliation can begin by inviting both veteran Baloch politicians and younger activists to the table, and listening to their grievances. Questionable cases against peaceful activists should also be reviewed. If the state is able to build confidence through such measures, the next step can be taken to address long-term goals, such as ensuring that the people of Balochistan are given the first right to their province's vast mineral wealth.

The province's miserable socioeconomic numbers also need the state's immediate attention; this may take decades to fix, but the first step must be taken now. Claims that hostile foreign forces are stirring up trouble in Balochistan carry much weight. These forces must be exposed and kinetic action should continue against those involved in terrorism in Balochistan.

But a long-term solution lies in taking the political path and involving the genuine representatives of the residents. The people will be waiting to see what practical steps the state takes to take forward the process of reconciliation in the province.

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Israel's war on life

A FINANCIAL Times investigation into southern Lebanon shows how Israel's brutal military campaign has torn civilian life apart. Nearly 85,000 housing units have been damaged or wrecked, at least 2,500km of water infrastructure has been hit, every bridge over the Litani has been rendered unusable, and more than a fifth of the south's farmland and forests has been devastated. Schools, medical facilities and energy systems lie wrecked. Most disturbing is the finding that much of this destruction took place after Israeli forces had established control over emptied villages. Israel claims it is dismantling Hezbollah infrastructure and protecting its northern communities. But destroying the systems that make civilian life possible — water, healthcare, roads, farms and homes — raises the question: is the objective security, or making return impossible? The pattern is all too familiar. Gaza has seen neighbourhoods flattened and its water, health, education and agricultural systems shattered. In occupied West Bank, demolitions and settler violence continue to drive Palestinians from their homes and land.

The world cannot keep documenting this destruction after the fact and calling that accountability. Israel cites security concerns but no security claim can become a licence to make civilian areas uninhabitable. The US and Europe should attach real conditions to military support, suspend arms transfers where there is a risk of unlawful use, and impose targeted sanctions on officials implicated in unlawful destruction or forced displacement. International courts and UN investigators must be allowed to work without obstruction. Above all, Israel's allies must stop treating international law as something to invoke for adversaries and negotiate around for friends. Southern Lebanon should not become another Gaza: a place where the world debates proportionality only after towns have been

erased. It must serve as a warning that impunity, left unchecked, becomes policy. With each unpunished precedent, the next devastated community becomes easier to create.

Published in Dawn, August 17th, 2026

Unfit supplies

A SYRINGE in a public hospital should be among the simplest guarantees of safety. Yet Sindh's Public Accounts Committee has been told that 38 of 55 companies supplying syringes and drip sets to government hospitals were providing products that failed laboratory standards. When products from so many approved suppliers fail testing, scrutiny cannot stop with the manufacturers; it must extend to the procurement and quality-control systems that allowed these goods into hospitals. FIRs have been registered, but prosecution cannot be the end of the matter. The government must immediately identify the companies and affected batches, quarantine or recall suspect stocks, order independent retesting, and audit the tenders, laboratories and officials involved in clearing them. It must also establish what 'substandard' meant in each case and make those findings public. Complaints of syringe reuse require a parallel investigation. The two issues should not be conflated without evidence, but together they expose serious weaknesses in the chain meant to protect patients from procurement to disposal.

Sindh has been warned before — repeatedly. In Ratodero in 2019, WHO identified unsafe medical injections and poor infection control among the risk factors in an HIV outbreak in which hundreds of children tested positive. Pakistan has since recorded child-centred HIV outbreaks in Jacobabad and Shikarpur, Mirpurkhas and Taunsa, and several districts in 2025. WHO and UNAIDS have linked such episodes to unsafe injections and blood transfusions. Only recently, amid another paediatric HIV crisis at Karachi's Valika Hospital, inspectors found needles removed from used syringes without proper sharps disposal, weak waste segregation and inadequate infection-control training. And HIV is not the only danger. WHO estimates Pakistan has the world's heaviest hepatitis C burden, with unsafe injections and blood practices contributing to transmission. Sindh already has a law regulating disposable syringes. What it lacks is credible enforcement. The province needs safety engineered single-use syringes, batch-level traceability, rigorous waste disposal, unannounced infection-control inspections and strong penalties for suppliers,

hospitals and officials who cut corners. These safeguards should be routine rather than measures adopted after another failure is exposed. Patients enter hospitals seeking treatment; no health system can tolerate becoming a source of the disease it is meant to prevent.

Published in Dawn, August 17th, 2026

Work in progress

THE State Bank governor's optimistic assessment of the economy must be seen in the context of the reality hidden beneath the headline numbers. While progressing from stabilisation to sustainable growth is critical, the transition is still in its early stages.

Mr Jameel Ahmad expects GDP growth to accelerate from 3.7pc in the last fiscal to between 3.5pc and 4.5pc in the current year, with the economy benefiting from greater discipline. Yet the range itself is revealing: at the lower end, growth would be actually slow. Even 4.5pc represents only a modest recovery for an economy with a rapidly expanding population, growing underemployment and unmet investment needs. Neither has stabilisation produced the necessary conditions for durable economic expansion.

The recent improvement rests heavily on restrained demand, tighter fiscal management, subdued imports and an improved external position due to debt rollovers and borrowings. These may be essential for stability, but they do not constitute a growth strategy. Sustainable growth requires stronger productivity, more private investment, expanding exports and investor-friendly reforms.

Mr Ahmad's reference to record remittances should be treated with caution. Remittances exceeding \$41bn in FY26 and potentially reaching \$44bn this year are providing crucial support to the external account. But remittances are household transfers, not a substitute for export competitiveness or FDI. An economy cannot sustainably finance its development ambitions by relying just on the earnings of its citizens abroad. Additionally, the expectation that reserves will exceed \$21bn is encouraging, but accumulation must be accompanied by a stronger capacity to earn foreign exchange.

Otherwise, the cycle of reserve rebuilding followed by another external financing crunch will return. Inflation averaging 7.1pc is also an important gain. Yet keeping inflation within the 5-7pc target demands more than monetary restraint. Food, energy and administered prices remain vulnerable to supply disruptions, exchange rate pressures, global commodity shocks and regional crises. Monetary policy can contain demand-driven inflation but it cannot solve structural weaknesses in agriculture, energy or supply chains. Meanwhile, the modernisation of the digital payment system is a useful step towards financial efficiency. But the system's infrastructure is an enabler rather than an engine of growth.

The big challenge, therefore, is to prevent stabilisation from becoming an end in itself. Pakistan has repeatedly achieved temporary macroeconomic stability, only to watch it unravel when growth accelerates through imports, fiscal slippages and external borrowing. This time, the test is whether the economy's productive capacity can be expanded without exposure to those vulnerabilities. The journey from stabilisation to sustainable growth will be completed when repeated cycles of borrowing, harsh adjustments and crisis management become a thing of the past.

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Wheat concerns

THE refusal by Punjab and Sindh to take imported wheat is less about concerns over grain quality and more about the unfinished transition from a state-dominated procurement system to a liberalised wheat market. Pakistan's two largest wheat-consuming provinces prefer to draw on existing federal stocks than accept lower quality imported grain. The imports, in fact, are the outcome of the very policy transition that left a gap in domestic procurement. With the state-led system scaled back without a proper replacement mechanism to maintain strategic stocks and manage supply, the government has had to turn to imports to fill the shortfall in domestic output. The supply deficit has increased flour prices by 77pc in a year; and the proposed import aims to ease market sentiments. There is a case for reducing the government's traditional role in the wheat market. Routine procurement, stockholding and price intervention distort market

signals and burden public finances. A competitive private market should allocate wheat more efficiently. But withdrawing the state from procurement does not mean withdrawing it from responsibility. The policy failure was the absence of a credible mechanism to replace the functions once performed by government procurement.

When the state buys less at harvest, farmers need protection against price collapse, while consumers later need protection against shortages and excessive price increases. These functions cannot be left to traders with greater access to finance, storage, market information and political influence than farmers. Reduced provincial procurement weakened farmers' bargaining power, while traders gained greater control over stocks and their release. Farmers suffered when prices weakened, even as consumers faced higher flour prices. This does not justify returning to the old procurement regime. But liberalisation cannot succeed without a credible replacement mechanism that ensures farmers receive a fair return and remain willing to produce enough wheat for a growing population.

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An olive branch?

NOW that the future of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir legislature appears a lot clearer, it seems a need is being felt to cool down the raised political temperatures between the two coalition partners at the centre. On Saturday, PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif, addressing a party convention in Murree, suggested that "political differences between rivals should never turn into animosity".

It was immediately clear he was addressing the deepening differences between the PPP and the PML-N. Indeed, he took up the bitterness between the two parties head-on, describing the PPP's complaints of rigging and administrative meddling as "upsetting". "I was upset over their losses, and I have good relations with them personally," Nawaz reflected during his speech. "If they were defeated, we must look at the reasons why."

It remains to be seen how his olive branch will be received. The PPP's young chairman had previously seethed publicly over his losses, and the war of words showed no signs of abating on Sunday, with the party's information secretary saying it would only accept the results of "free and fair elections", while comparing the AJK polls to previous controversial ones in Punjab.

Still, many believe the two parties will find themselves at the same table once the election fever subsides. Their rivalry seems more performative than deep-rooted, especially given the stakes involved.

Whatever its protestations about the PML-N's conduct, the fact remains that the PPP is entrenched in the ruling configuration. It appears unlikely that it will sabotage the arrangement at the centre, no matter how acutely it might be feeling its electoral losses in AJK at present.

The elder Nawaz's remarks, too, merely expressed a wish for their relationship to return to what it was. Tellingly, his goodwill was not meant for the opposition but only for the PML-N's partner in the current set-up.

That is the real disappointment: reconciliation, to Nawaz, appears to mean restoring his closed arrangement with the PPP, not widening the political space for everyone. The inertia that has stifled all political energy is, therefore, not going anywhere. This is not to say that it will be smooth sailing.

There is tension running beneath the surface over rumours of an administrative reconfiguration of the state. This may well be the challenge that actually tests the PPP-PML-N partnership.

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Overdue relief

THE Supreme Court finally intervened on Tuesday, about three months after it was approached by former prime minister Imran Khan for enforcement of his rights as a prisoner.

Acting on recent medical reports showing what appeared to be a concerning deterioration in the jailed leader's health, the court directed the relevant authorities to move the PTI founder to Islamabad's Shifa International Hospital for a complete medical examination under the supervision of one of his sisters and a personal physician, along with other health specialists.

"We are mindful of the constitutional and legal obligation of the state, and consequently of the Supreme Court, to safeguard the life, health, dignity and security of persons in custody," the court observed in its ruling. That was not the only relief granted to the ailing ex-PM. The court also directed the jail authorities to ensure weekly meetings between Mr Khan and his family members, as well as telephonic conversations with his sons. Soon afterwards, one of Mr Khan's sisters was able to meet him in prison.

Going by reports about the PTI leader's health, Mr Khan seems to have suffered some ailment or the other for many months now. However, his jailers have persistently denied

he may be unwell, apparently going as far as to actively resist and thwart efforts to have him examined by physicians of his choosing.

It is unbecoming of a state to treat former leaders so poorly. Other leaders, including the two senior-most leaders of the PML-N and PPP, have suffered similar or worse cruelties in the past. It would have earned them much goodwill if they had intervened, even once, to ensure that rival leaders were not treated as poorly during their own terms.

It seems pertinent to point out here that several other political leaders remain in jail, including women, who have been suffering similarly from poor health or the vagaries of old age. They, too, deserve the state's sympathy.

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Climate hits home

EUROPE'S summer has come to mirror the warnings climate scientists have issued for years. Wildfires have swept through France, Greece, Spain, Croatia and Germany, while repeated heatwaves have strained water supplies and power systems, damaged crops and forced evacuations. Western Europe recorded its hottest June-July period on record, while Britain entered a fifth heatwave this summer. Across the Atlantic, Canada and the US have also faced fires, smoke, flooding and extreme heat. Such events were once regarded as freak weather. And now, the World Meteorological Organisation warns that extreme heat is becoming more frequent, more intense and longer-lasting as the planet warms. For Pakistan, this is all too familiar. This country has long lived on the front line of climate change despite contributing less than 1pc of global greenhouse-gas emissions. The catastrophic floods of 2022 caused more than \$30bn in damage and economic losses, while recurring heatwaves, glacial melt, erratic monsoons and drought continue to punish people who did little to create the crisis. There should be no satisfaction in seeing richer societies suffer. But perhaps experiencing climate disruption at home will make governments understand the urgency felt in countries such as Pakistan.

That understanding must be translated into money and action. Developed countries promised \$100bn a year in climate finance by 2020, yet the target was first reached only in 2022. COP29 replaced it with a goal of at least \$300bn annually for developing countries by 2035, alongside a broader effort to mobilise \$1.3tr a year. COP30 then called for adaptation finance to be tripled by 2035. These figures must not become another series of impressive announcements followed by delayed delivery, inaccessible funds or loans that deepen debt. Climate finance must be predictable, grant-based and easier to access, with serious funding for adaptation and loss and damage. Wealthy countries have discovered that adaptation is expensive: fires, drought and heat are imposing enormous costs on public budgets and insurers. That should strengthen the case for solidarity. When COP31 meets in Antalya in November, the question should no longer be whether climate change is real or expensive. The evidence is burning across landscapes and overwhelming communities. The test is whether proximity to disaster has finally produced political seriousness — and the conscience to honour obligations to those who have borne the heaviest burden for the least responsibility.

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Gulf deadlock

APPREHENSIONS regarding a fresh round of US-Iran hostilities are palpable, as the 60-day window for negotiations envisaged under the Islamabad MoU expired on Monday, with no forward movement on the diplomatic front.

In fact, Tehran disputes the characterisation of the 60-day window as a deadline, with Iran's foreign ministry spokesman saying it was only a "framework" to facilitate talks. Meanwhile, the noises coming out of Washington are not reassuring at all. US President Donald Trump has asked Iran to "put up the white flag of surrender" while also threatening to bomb his ally Oman if it "gets in the way".

Oman is currently negotiating with Iran to resolve the Strait of Hormuz crisis. Mr Trump's latest pronouncement has been to declare the strait a "new US territory". Such unhinged Trumpian antics have made it particularly difficult for America to extricate itself from a quagmire of its own making.

If the past six months have shown anything, it is that the Iranians do not yield to threats. Therefore, asking Tehran to surrender is a non-starter. And, threatening to bomb Oman defies logic. The Gulf sultanate is one of the few states that maintain close ties with both Iran and the US, and can play a crucial role in taking the diplomatic process forward.

Clearly, very little thought — if any — goes into the American leader's 'diplomacy', as he lambastes both friends and foes with incendiary comments. If there are any adults left in the White House situation room, they need to stand up and be counted, and offer wiser counsel to their boss.

The fact is that saner elements within the US leadership, as well as in Iran, must realise that the Islamabad MoU still offers the best framework for peace. Therefore, it would be a mistake to discard the document. If the MoU is allowed to lapse, and a hot war resumes, it will be devastating for all. The front line has already expanded, pulling in the GCC states and Iraq, while Yemen's pro-Iran Houthis seek to replicate the closure of the Strait of Hormuz with the Bab al-Mandeb blockade.

Their attacks on Saudi targets are also expanding. Therefore, there is a need to revive and expand the MoU. Lebanon was included in the document, but Israel has been raining fire on the country despite a supposed ceasefire. In fact, the Iranian foreign minister has said that Israel is trying to sabotage the Iran-US deal.

All these fronts — the Gulf, Lebanon, Yemen — require an immediate, coordinated and lasting ceasefire, while Washington must offer genuine sanctions relief to Iran, and ditch its threats and absurd claims. Tehran, conversely, should pledge to keep Hormuz open, and end its attacks on the GCC states. Without these concessions, a far more destructive conflict could ensue.

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Battery economy

THE government's decision to develop standards for lithium-ion vehicle batteries is a positive step. As Pakistan moves towards electric mobility, the initiative could support the emergence of a domestic battery industry and create jobs in battery assembly and related services. Several EV assemblers are interested in working on battery assembly or cell manufacturing. This suggests that an ecosystem can begin to develop around the fast-growing EV market here. There is, however, an important distinction between building a battery industry and establishing a genuinely local battery manufacturing industry. Pakistan currently lacks most of the raw materials, technology and upstream industrial capacity required to manufacture lithium-ion cells at scale. Hence, much of what may initially be described as local manufacturing is likely to be battery-pack assembly using imported cells and other components. Assembly can generate employment and technological capabilities, but it should not be mistaken for complete localisation.

This is why we should think beyond the immediate goal of assembling batteries and invest seriously in battery recycling and the wider circular economy. As the country's EVs, two- and three-wheelers, buses and stationary energy storage systems expand, a large number of batteries will reach the end of their first life. Pakistan should build the capacity to recover valuable materials. This could address the absence of domestic raw materials. Battery recycling should be viewed as a strategic investment, not merely an environmental initiative. The government should encourage investment in recycling plants, establish standards for collection and safe dismantling, introduce extended producer-responsibility rules and incentivise investors to participate in take-back schemes. It should also promote technologies to recover lithium, nickel, cobalt, manganese, graphite and other valuable materials. The long-term goal should be a circular battery economy: importing batteries and materials initially, assembling them locally, recovering materials from spent batteries and feeding them back into domestic production.

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A local address

GOOGLE has opened its doors in Islamabad. On Tuesday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif inaugurated the company's first office in Pakistan, welcoming a delegation led by its vice president for government affairs, Wilson White. For a firm that has operated here for years through remote regional staff but never a physical presence, having a plaque on an Islamabad wall is a genuine milestone. It should be welcomed. But those watching should not get too excited. It needs to be understood that what was inaugurated on Tuesday is, first, a channel for engagement with the state. The title of the visiting official should have given that away. Google seems to be acting in response to the government's ambition of a \$30bn IT export target, as it aligns neatly with its own claim of having supported hundreds of thousands of jobs here over the past decade. In time, the new relationship may bring localised infrastructure, cloud support and AI training that officials are counting on. For now, however, it seems that officials are more keen on impressing Pakistan's 'specific circumstances' on Google officials, and securing greater cooperation on security-related matters. This was the focus of a high-level meeting between the minister of state for interior and senior Google executives the very next day.

Pakistani developers, publishers and start-ups have long struggled to resolve account and monetisation disputes with Google, with a company representative usually reachable only by email to another time zone. A local presence may ease some of that friction, but it is too early to say. For publishers, advertisers and creators, Google is also the gatekeeper which controls how their work is found, how it is monetised, and also how it is absorbed into AI systems which are taking news readership away. Around the world, this is currently the subject of much litigation and bargaining. Pakistani publishers, too, need an opportunity to engage directly with Google on this matter. Meanwhile, the state should resist congratulating itself. A foreign giant's office counts for little if the government keeps throttling bandwidth and restricting the internet on which its own export targets depend. The freelancers that ministers keep celebrating lose contracts every time the connection drops. Google's arrival is a vote of confidence, and may encourage others to look harder at a young, underserved market. That is reason for optimism. It is not, on its own, reason for celebration.

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Beyond jingoism

UNABLE to come to terms with both its military and narrative failures during and after the May 2025 hostilities with Pakistan, the Indian state continues to flog a dead horse by trying to depict loss as success.

The latest example of this is a new documentary released in India titled Declassified: Operation Sindoor. The film tries to paint the clash as an Indian victory, relying more on revisionism and fantasy than what actually transpired across the battlespace. Pakistan's military spokesman has termed it a "Bollywood-style" production and a "mutilation of history".

It should be remembered that the majority of Indian media outlets during the conflict had resorted to high-pitched jingoism, reporting that key cities in Pakistan had been 'conquered' and 'devastated' by the Indians. It mattered little that these preposterous claims had nothing to do with reality. The new documentary appears to me a more 'polished' attempt at regurgitating the same narrative.

Instead of pouring its energies into demonising Pakistan and conjuring up phantom victories, the Indian state would be better off trying to mend fences for a secure future for all of South Asia. Very few outside India's corridors of power are buying the narrative about an Indian 'victory' during last year's clash, just as there have been few takers for the spurious claim peddled by New Delhi that Pakistan was responsible for the Pahalgam atrocity.

Neutral observers paint a more nuanced picture of the confrontation, pointing to Pakistan's clear successes in countering Indian air attacks. No respectable third party has endorsed claims of an Indian 'victory'. But facts, it seems, matter little to the BJP-led government in New Delhi, which insists on manufacturing fantastical accounts of the May war. It forgets that many Indian politicians themselves have questioned their government's tall claims regarding the clash.

There is a need for India to move beyond such narrow perspectives and look to the future. The fires of war are raging not very far from South Asia, and both states, particularly India, should redouble their efforts to bring calm to the subcontinent, instead of stoking tensions. New Delhi's toxic jingoism and military misadventures have backfired. It is time for India to return to the diplomatic track, and approach Pakistan with respect.

Tens of millions in South Asia continue to suffer from poverty, disease and illiteracy. Climate change is a common enemy — smog and natural disasters do not respect borders. While it would be simplistic to assume that both states will bury the hatchet immediately, at least the first steps can be taken towards normalisation. These should include the return of high commissioners to both capitals, and a pledge to restart the dialogue process to address all outstanding irritants standing in the way of better ties.

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Victims of terrorism

OVER the past quarter century, Pakistan has paid a staggering toll in lives lost to terrorism. Therefore, today, as the world observes the International Day of Remembrance of and Tribute to the Victims of Terrorism, the state must pledge to root out the scourge of violent extremism, and continue to care for the families of the victims. From 2001, when America's so-called war on terror began, till 2022, terrorism in Pakistan claimed at least 83,000 lives. From 2022 till the present, several thousand lives have been added to this grim tally, due to the ongoing terrorist activities in the country, which picked up pace after the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021. Cumulatively, over the course of these 25 years, terrorists have struck mosques and churches, bazaars and processions, schools and madressahs. It took several military operations to quell the post-2001 wave of terrorism, especially as terrorist attacks increased in frequency from 2007 onwards. Today, we find ourselves back to square one, as a new generation of terrorists wreaks havoc across the land.

Much has been written about counterterrorism strategies; but keeping with the theme of the day — 'Healing through Memory' — we must never forget those who were martyred or injured in acts of terrorism. One way of doing so would be for the state to ensure that

the next of kin of victims of terrorism, whether security personnel or civilians, are looked after financially. The state does announce Shuhada packages, and it should be ensured that assistance is offered in a transparent and dignified manner. Victims who are injured, or left permanently disabled and thus unable to work, need to be looked after. Apart from the financial aspect, victims of terrorism and their families need to be offered professional psychological support to expedite mental recovery. Above all else, to honour the memory of victims, the state must vow to permanently uproot the menace of terrorism from Pakistan.

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Flood foretold

RAWALPINDI'S latest flooding should put paid to the fiction that urban inundation is an unavoidable consequence of the monsoon. On Wednesday, the twin cities received their heaviest rainfall of the season, with 147mm recorded at Kutchery and 127mm at Shamsabad. Leh Nullah rose to 6.7m at New Kattarian, warning sirens were sounded, and water entered homes, shops and markets across low-lying neighbourhoods. Yet the nullah itself did not overflow. Smaller drains and sewerage channels failed under the pressure: roads became streams, vehicles were submerged and residents were left bailing water from their homes. Days earlier, rainwater had entered the basement of Holy Family Hospital where the gynaecology and paediatrics departments are located. All this cannot be chalked up to exceptional rain. This is a story of a city repeatedly exposed by inadequate drainage, encroachments, poor waste management and development that pays little attention to the natural movement of water. The disruption also carries an economic cost, damaging vehicles and property, closing businesses and hitting daily-wage workers hardest.

The warnings were there well before this week's downpour. In April, Wasa said a survey of Leh Nullah had identified 19 vulnerable points, while preparations were under way to clean the nullah and 11 major drains before the monsoon. The danger, therefore, was not unforeseeable. Climate change is making intense bursts of rain more likely, but it cannot become an alibi for civic failure. Rawalpindi sits downstream of a catchment extending into Islamabad; when heavy rain falls on increasingly built-up land, enormous volumes of run-off descend rapidly towards the city. That reality demands more than pumps, sirens

and rescue teams once the water begins to rise. Drains must be kept clear throughout the year, encroachments removed, sewerage capacity expanded and new construction subjected to flood-risk scrutiny. Islamabad and Rawalpindi must plan the Leh basin as one hydrological system. Pakistan's cities cannot stop the rain, but they can stop turning every cloudburst into a disaster. What Pindi needs is sustained urban governance, not another annual ritual of dredging, warnings and emergency response. Officials should also be answerable when known choke points remain neglected, drains are allowed to clog, or construction proceeds without regard for flood pathways and adequate urban drainage capacity.

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Political rumblings

SOME game is afoot. What precisely it is, is difficult to say. Islamabad hums with rumours, half-truths and speculation. Meanwhile, a Supreme Court order to shift the ailing former prime minister Imran Khan from prison to hospital has further unsettled the political sphere.

Suddenly, every move is being dissected. PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has chosen this opportunity to make good on his "tick tock, tick tock" threat to the PML-N, delivered earlier this month amidst a thorny general election in Azad Kashmir. His anger over poll irregularities appears to have brought him closer to the opposition benches.

A senior delegation of PPP leaders, including Mr Bhutto-Zardari himself, met the opposition leader in the National Assembly this Tuesday, ostensibly to seek 'cooperation' during parliamentary proceedings. The fruits of that meeting were evident in the NA session held the same day, when the PPP managed to compel the government to virtually suspend its legislative agenda.

A follow-up meeting between the PPP and opposition leaders on Wednesday was described as “a good start”, with the politicians agreeing to maintain contact and cooperate on legislative matters in parliament. A common agenda item was also agreed to, namely, reforms to the electoral process. Mr Bhutto-Zardari also chose the opportunity to ‘welcome’ the Supreme Court decision to move Mr Khan to hospital, describing it as “within the democratic tradition”.

The confrontation continued on Thursday, with the PPP chief excoriating the government for not taking ruling allies on board while legislating after the defence minister presented two ‘surprise’ bills for approval. PPP leaders say the party is annoyed over what it sees as rampant rigging in the AJK polls, the PML-N’s refusal to honour various agreements with its coalition partner, the issue of new provinces, and fresh legislation the N-League wishes to table. The PPP appears intent on thwarting legislative business until its grievances are addressed.

Whether a new legislative surprise — of the constitutional variety — is ready to be sprung upon the nation, it is difficult to say. For that same reason, it is difficult to fathom whether the political factions are realigning to protect their shared interests, or merely to give the ruling PML-N a much-needed reminder of the ephemerality of political power. Whatever the case, it is encouraging to see legislators assert themselves after a period in which parliament appeared to be running on autopilot.

Coalition politics necessarily involves bargaining and disagreement; what matters is whether such manoeuvring produces more accountable parliamentary government, rather than simply redistributing political leverage. If the current rumblings can compel public representatives to engage more seriously with the business of legislation and the concerns of their constituents, and force open debate on matters of national import, they may yet prove a good omen for parliamentary politics.

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History revisited

THE government's decision to expand its Unesco World Heritage list from 25 to 37 sites is a welcome move that promises to boost our global heritage profile and generate tourism opportunities. The latest additions — Bazira-Barikot, the Bhamala Buddhist Complex, Sethi House, the Mai Qamro Mosque, Pharwala Fort, the Kalasha Valley Cultural Landscape and the Gor Khatri Archaeological Complex among them — symbolise this region's multiple rebirths. Pakistan's historical wealth — from fortified edifices to living traditions — is a part of its civilisational legacy. Sadly, criminal cartels have long exploited poor law enforcement and economic frailty to plunder treasures, especially in Punjab and KP. More inscriptions will go a long way towards stemming the erosion of ancient marvels.

Antiquity is a celebration of diversity. It also maps our identity. In Pakistan, regrettably, even restoration work triggers concern as it is merely cosmetic and hardly an exercise in transparency, accountability, cooperation and respect for academic opinion. Science, and engagement with historians and international preservation experts, must guide our efforts to save historical bequests. Additionally, specialised training, modern methods, tightened borders and site security are vital to prevent damage and theft. Climate-related destruction has exposed already vulnerable sites, while poverty forces the underprivileged to resort to illegal excavations. Meanwhile, rules are meaningless unless they are faithfully implemented. Persistent danger to the most precious parts of this land imperil Pakistan's position as it pursues wider respect on the world heritage stage. Archaeologists have for decades unearthed the layers of time hidden in Kushan, Buddhist, Roman, Ghaznavid, Scythian, and Mughal remains. The fact that just one site — Peshawar's Gor Khatri — bears the imprints of 13 civilisations shows how essential it is for Pakistan to demonstrate sustained political commitment towards preserving the past for future generations.

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Passing on relief

ON Wednesday, Ogra announced a Rs32.63 reduction in high-speed diesel prices — from Rs395.69 to Rs363.06 per litre — alongside a Rs2.97 increase in petrol prices. It presented the move as major relief for the public. It is, in a sense. Diesel prices have a broad impact because the fuel is widely used by heavy transport, power plants and large generators. Yet, real relief will materialise only if the reduction in diesel prices translates into corresponding lower transport and freight fares and, in turn, cheaper everyday goods, particularly food. Pakistan's fuel pricing follows a familiar pattern. When diesel prices go up, transporters, wholesalers and retailers quickly raise fares and prices, blaming higher diesel costs even before the increase has taken full effect. But when fuel prices come down, the savings are rarely passed on to consumers as quickly. Before reducing their own prices, businesses across economies similar to ours often wait to see whether a cut in fuel prices will last. The problem is more pronounced in Pakistan where government institutions have limited capacity to ensure that lower fuel costs are passed on to consumers.

Freight charges, intercity bus and city fares, the prices of food and other essential commodities such as vegetables, cement and steel were all increased when fuel prices rose earlier this year as hostilities broke out between the US and Iran. But these higher charges have not come down even though diesel rates have declined by almost a third of their peak of Rs520.35 per litre in April. Provincial governments play a crucial role here: they approve fares, while district price-control authorities are responsible for monitoring prices in the markets and shops. In practice, however, both systems have largely been reactive, responding to public complaints rather than proactively checking whether transport fares and retail prices have fallen in line with lower fuel costs. In fact, the track record of the provinces in enforcing downward revisions after fuel cuts is weak. Consumer prices and transport fares have rarely moved down, and even if they have it has been hardly more than a symbolic move, despite a significant decline in fuel rates. For consumers to benefit, the provinces must ensure that transport, freight and food prices fall within days, and not weeks. They have the legal authority to act but do not seem to possess the will to do so.

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Hospital visit

ALL the government had to do was take a prisoner from jail to an appointed hospital and allow them to have their medical tests administered under the supervision of individuals they trust.

This would have checked off the directive issued by the Supreme Court some 48 hours earlier, and earned the PML-N some much-needed goodwill. Instead, it took an adversarial stance against the order, insisted on having its own way despite explicit directions from the court, delayed implementation till the very end, and then failed to implement the order in a letter while claiming that it had fulfilled its 'technical' requirement.

To what end? As the drama unfolded on Pakistani news media on Friday, the government itself was helping cement the perception that the jailed former prime minister, Imran Khan, remains as relevant as ever. It turned a routine matter into a high-stakes political crisis.

This, of course, was not the first time this government has insisted on its own interpretation of court orders despite clear instructions to the contrary. And it appears that the other side, too, has started discounting the power and privileges of the judiciary. Despite clear prohibitions on 'politicising' Mr Khan's health issues as a condition to meet him, the sister who met the PTI founder, Dr Uzma Khan, promptly held a very public media briefing on Friday afternoon, detailing her interaction with the jailed leader and the health issues he had complained to her about.

The court had warned it would withdraw the relief it had granted Mr Khan if his family or lawyers went public about his health, but it seems they gave short shrift to the condition after seeing yet another order flouted with impunity. As a result, the Supreme Court was made to look irrelevant by both parties, who turned it into a political tussle.

The government, specifically the PML-N, appears intent on keeping Mr Khan behind bars and away from the public eye. The flustered reaction which various ministers and allied talking heads had to the Supreme Court order exposed a level of insecurity that no amount of grandstanding can cover up.

At a time when the state apparatus is rumoured to be gearing up for major legislative changes, and when a key coalition partner is rallying the opposition to thwart the

government's legislative agenda and force concessions out of it, the PML-N has come out of this episode looking weak. With a little bit of magnanimity, it could have easily tided over the Supreme Court's intervention without losing any political capital.

It can still make amends. There is no harm in allowing prisoners access to medical facilities of their choosing. With concerns rising over the welfare of political prisoners, especially women incarcerated for unprecedented periods by this government, it can still choose magnanimity over retribution.

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Reviving hockey

THE recent World Cup campaign has demonstrated that Pakistan's fight to restore their place in the global hockey elite continues. Yet, there are promising signs. Pakistan had failed to qualify for hockey's showpiece event last time out, having also missed out on the last three Olympic Games. But while their opening match — a 4-1 reverse against England — was a painful reminder of how far the former four-time world champions have fallen, the national team bowed out with a 3-3 draw with Wales and a fighting 5-3 loss against India. Unfortunately, Pakistan have not beaten their neighbours in the last decade — unlike Pakistan, the administrators across the border have diligently worked at promoting the sport. India were bronze medallists at the last two Olympics Games; their resurgence stemming from sustained investment in the grassroots and creating a domestic ecosystem. In recent times, it has become evident that success in hockey does not rest on talent alone. What also counts is how that talent is harnessed. India used their failure to qualify for the 2008 Beijing Olympics as a wake-up call. It led to the formation of the Hockey India League that transformed their fortunes. Pakistan needs to do the same. Earlier this year, the systemic rot in the sport was laid bare when the national team — participating in the FIH Pro League — was stranded in Sydney and forced to stay in a guest house.

It subsequently led to an overhaul of the Pakistan Hockey Federation with federal secretary for inter-provincial coordination Mohyuddin Ahmed Wani being appointed as the country's hockey chief. Mr Wani has made some strides, notably appointing

Dutchman Bob Veldhof as the national team coach. He has laid out an ambitious plan to rebuild hockey and announced the start of the league, while also creating a pathway to connect school hockey with district, provincial, national and international levels. In a break from the past, such plans and promises should be properly implemented.

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Beyond the tax form

FINANCE Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is right to wonder why salaried taxpayers have to navigate a tax return form so complicated that even an MBA graduate would struggle to fill it. But that concern will mean little unless the authorities simplify the form. The salaried class is among the most documented and compliant segments of the economy. Deduction of their tax at source leaves little room for concealment or manipulation. But they continue to face a disproportionate compliance burden when filing returns. Simplifying the return form, as has been done for traders, would be more than a convenience. It would recognise that taxpayers who already fulfil their obligations should not have to deal with unnecessary complexity. But easier filing alone will not address the larger problem. Salaried taxpayers need substantially greater relief than what was offered in the FY27 budget. They have borne a heavy tax burden for years, while inflation has eroded their real incomes. In many households, nominal salary increases have merely compensated for higher food, housing, education, transport and utility costs, while progressive taxation has pushed more income into higher tax brackets.

The salaried middle class should not be an endlessly convenient source of revenue. Unlike large parts of the informal economy, salaried workers have little opportunity to understate income, negotiate tax liabilities or shift earnings outside the formal system. Their compliance is automatic. This highlights the basic issue of tax fairness. Broadening the tax base is essential, particularly by bringing undertaxed segments of the informal economy into the net. Revenue mobilisation should not rely disproportionately on those who are already fully documented. The government's efforts to register traders through a simplified fixed-tax regime will be useful only if they produce a balanced distribution of the tax burden. It is about time the government revisited the income-tax structure for salaried people, raised the thresholds at which higher rates apply and ensured that future salary-tax adjustments take inflation and real purchasing power into account. Pakistan needs a

wider tax base, not simply higher taxation of the easiest taxpayers to identify. Providing meaningful tax relief to the salaried class along with simplifying the return form should be the government's primary objective.

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Empty overtures

EARLIER this week, the prime minister had extended yet another invitation to the opposition for negotiations, noting that "it takes two to tango". "I once again invite the opposition for talks [...] to support Pakistan's economic progress and to strengthen democracy," Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was quoted as saying. "Now it's on them how soon they agree to constructive dialogue."

The 'offer' echoed a statement made days earlier by Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Tariq Fazal Chaudhry in the Senate, in which he told the opposition that "the solution lies in seriousness". That same day, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Political Affairs Rana Sanaullah, Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar and Mr Chaudhry had met the opposition leaders of the Senate and the National Assembly. The two sides discussed the appointment of the chief election commissioner, as well as the political situation and political matters, according to a press statement issued by the opposition TTAP alliance.

Yet, if earlier efforts at engagement are anything to go by, little hope can be attached to this latest initiative. The government has also made the possibility of talks more complicated by mishandling a Supreme Court order to have former PM Imran Khan medically examined. Its actions have only increased bitterness in Mr Khan's party, the PTI, and emboldened those elements within it who are more inclined to push for confrontation. Meanwhile, the government's most important coalition partner, the PPP, has started courting the opposition for support for its own agenda, which includes blocking the government's legislative activities. Another formidable opposition force, the JUI-F, has since entered the picture and is signalling that it will join hands with the opposition alliance to challenge the government. These developments do not point towards any inclination for a sit-down.

The missing millions

SINDH'S five-year pledge with the UN to bring children into school is welcome, but the province never had any shortage of plans. What it lacks is progress. Unicef estimates that 7.4m children aged five to 16 in Sindh — 44pc of the age group — are out of school. The 2023 census found that 6.6m children in this bracket had never attended school at all, showing that the problem is not one of retention. This is damning because the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2013, guarantees free schooling to every child aged five to 16 and obliges the government to ensure admission and attendance. There has been movement: girls' stipends, school-meal schemes, teacher-led school budgets and non-formal education programmes address barriers. Yet the scale is inadequate. In 2024-25, Sindh had 1,152 non-formal centres serving 58,411 learners, while 14,343 schools damaged in the 2022 floods were still awaiting restoration in March.

The new plan must be judged by children reached, not programmes announced. Sindh needs a district-by-district register of out-of-school children, with local authorities responsible for finding them, identifying why they are excluded and getting them into an appropriate learning pathway. Poverty, child labour, distance, unsafe travel for girls, disability and missing middle and secondary schools require different responses. Stipends and meals should be expanded to improve attendance; reliable transport is needed for communities without nearby schools; and accelerated learning must be scaled for older children who cannot simply enter age-inappropriate classes. Flood reconstruction needs firmer deadlines and public progress reporting. Teacher deployment should follow enrolment needs, while schools must be evaluated for learning, not just attendance. Above all, annual district targets should be published and independently verified. Thirteen years after Sindh legislated a right to education, millions of children are still out of school. Another five-year plan deserves support only if it converts that right into a classroom seat.

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Privatisation push

THE privatisation programme seems to be moving forward — finally. Eleven prospective investors have now submitted expressions of interest for Gepco following a similarly strong response for Fesco earlier this month, with Iesco's deadline still to come in September. The PIA sale appears to have supplied the push this programme needed — proof that the government is ready to wash its hands of businesses it should not have involved itself in. What makes the Discos' response more encouraging than PIA's is who is showing up. Turkish and Saudi investors are in the mix for both Gepco and Fesco, and Fesco separately drew Chinese interest — a foreign presence PIA's privatisation could not attract. Add a list of big domestic companies and the field looks genuinely competitive rather than a formality staged for the government's benefit.

None of that guarantees that interest will convert into bids the government is hoping for. The investor feedback report the Privatisation Commission compiled after its roadshows in Turkiye, Saudi Arabia and China reads more like a conditions list. Investors want the multi-year tariff control period stretched from five years to seven to 10, arguing that distribution assets with decades-long lives cannot be financed against a five-year regulatory horizon. They want tariffs tied to individual Disco performance rather than the current uniform structure, which effectively taxes efficient operators to subsidise inefficient ones. They want binding protection against tariffs or contracts being reopened later by a government or a court, a fear rooted in our history of renegotiating deals after the fact. And they want a regulator that can actually make faster decisions, have clearer enforcement powers but enjoy less discretion to intervene unpredictably. These are not cosmetic asks. They go to the heart of whether Pakistan's regulatory institutions can credibly commit to arrangements that outlast the political cycle in which they are signed. If the government treats these concerns as bargaining noise to be managed rather than structural gaps to be fixed, the interest recorded this month may thin out by the time actual bids are due. But if it uses this feedback to extend the tariff regime, build real regulatory independence and put contractual guarantees beyond the reach of future reversal, the payoff will extend well past the power sector.

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‘Grand dialogue’

THE country’s top civil and military leaders are absolutely right when they say that dialogue and development are needed to address Balochistan’s crises.

But perhaps one should recall that many earlier attempts by the state to bring peace to the province were stalled or remain unimplemented. In order to truly stabilise Balochistan and bring lasting peace to this troubled province, a credible political process must begin, with the state guaranteeing that it will fully implement previous promises, as well as new agreements.

While speaking at the Balochistan National Workshop in Islamabad recently, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called for a “grand, frank and meaningful dialogue” to address the province’s issues. He added that the province’s people had first right over its resources. In a similar vein the chief of defence forces stressed the need for empowering Balochistan’s youth.

It is certainly welcome that the rulers see the need to tackle Balochistan’s political problems through dialogue. While kinetic measures are needed to deal with immediate terrorist threats, the underlying factors fuelling discontent can only be handled through a political process. The state must keep in mind previous attempts to address the province’s problems.

For example, the PPP government had in 2009 launched the Aghaz-i-Huqooq-i-Balochistan package. Despite the passage of 17 years, many of the package’s key points remain unimplemented. For example, it had proposed releasing political workers, except those involved in heinous crimes. However, over the past few months, we have seen peaceful activists rounded up and thrown in jail. Similarly, the 2009 package had sought to address the province’s socioeconomic woes; suffice it to say, social indicators in Balochistan remain miserable. The PML-N had launched a package of its own in 2015. Much of that scheme also remains unfulfilled. CPEC was similarly supposed to transform the province’s fortunes. It has not.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, the state must implement what it had promised in these packages. Many of these schemes' salient points reflect the demands of the province's nationalist politicians. Therefore, to implement these promises in full, a grand dialogue should bring on board the province's genuine political leadership, as well as peaceful activists, while a verifiable and transparent mechanism needs to be worked out to help implement previous and new promises.

The past few months have seen a sharp spike in terrorist activity in Balochistan. The only sustainable way of addressing the insurgency is to supplement kinetic actions with a genuine political process that can, in the long-term, eliminate the underlying factors that are fuelling discontent.

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Women's trauma

THE blame for the miserable state of women lies at the door of successive governments that did little to shape protective structures and pro-women narratives. Three women were lost to brutality recently. In Rawalpindi, 45-year-old Hina Javed was found dead with torture marks, hands tied, and a wire around her neck; her husband and domestic help have been arrested. Hina Zareef from Islamabad was allegedly shot by her father because she was ending an abusive marriage. Sukkur's Jannat Khatoon was burnt during a quarrel in her marital home. What these victims had in common was facing deadly abuse within the confines of their 'safe' spaces. Familiar condemnations from politicians and social media outrage followed. Meanwhile, the Women's Parliamentary Caucus has condemned the murder in Rawalpindi. Sadly, so far, no one has taken to the streets — an effective means of protest.

Laws for women's safety — including a mandatory prison term for 'honour' killing — exist. Yet, poor enforcement by a chauvinistic criminal justice system has thrown up conviction rates that linger at a dismal 0.5pc for 'honour' killings and rape, 0.1pc for kidnapping, and 1.3pc for domestic violence. Most instances go unreported. This crisis of accountability

has left us with an epidemic of violence. The state's failure to end impunity stands in the way of females living well. Patriarchal attitudes have long seeped into law enforcement. As a result, victims are either doubted and blamed or compelled to withdraw their cases for out-of-court settlements. Reforms, including a consequential increase in the number of women in the police force with fast-track courts for cases of gender-based violence, are needed. Survivors must get legal aid and identity protection. Families of the slain must see perpetrators punished. Violence — the daily truth of Pakistan's women — has placed the country among the most dangerous places for females. Justice alone can keep the social contract between citizens and the state from fraying.

Published in Dawn, August 25th, 2026

Secure identities

THE common citizen's interactions with the bureaucracy are rarely pleasant in Pakistan. But over the last 26 years, at least where securing identity documents is concerned, Nadra has attempted to streamline this process. The latest development in this regard is the move to make proof of life certificates required by pensioners free, and to expand the channels through which senior citizens can access the document. Seniors can now personally, or through an immediate family member, access the certificates through the PakID mobile app, eliminating the need for physical verification. Nadra also recently created the National Pensioners Register to help eliminate fraud, and streamline verification. Moreover, the authority has announced the launch of QR-based ID cards, which will replace chip-based cards. This should help reduce data entry errors.

The creation of Nadra in 2000 resulted in the replacement of the old National Identity Cards — which were much easier to forge — with computerised IDs. Though the authority has achieved much over the decades, there is still room for improvement. For example, it has suffered major data breaches, which resulted in the sensitive information of millions of citizens being leaked to unscrupulous elements. Therefore, in the digital age, improved cybersecurity is essential for Nadra to protect the personal information of citizens. Those not entitled to CNICs — for instance, foreigners — are still able to secure the key document because of the presence of corrupt officials within the organisation. Hence, better internal oversight is needed; Nadra says it has introduced AI tools and iris scanning to identify ineligible individuals who have secured ID cards. Overcrowding and long

queues at Nadra centres are another matter of concern for the public. Partly because of the large number of applicants, and partly due to bureaucratic lethargy and system breakdowns, applicants often have to queue up for hours to get their documents made. These processes need to be made faster and more efficient without compromising essential security checks, although the promotion of the Nadra app can perhaps help reduce the long lines at registration centres. Nadra needs to keep adapting to keep pace with the digital age, while also ensuring that citizens have a hassle-free experience when getting their documents made.

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Fixing agriculture

PRIME Minister Shehbaz Sharif's renewed push to strengthen agricultural research, provide quality seeds to smallholders and medium-scale farmers, and improve crop estimate systems could help address some of the sector's long-standing weaknesses in farm productivity.

But good intentions alone are not enough. The real question is whether the government can turn his directives into a coherent policy and implement it effectively. That would require reforming federal and provincial agriculture policies, markets and institutions that determine what farmers produce, what they pay for inputs and what they earn. Above all, an agricultural policy must be responsive to the needs of small and medium-sized farmers rather than powerful lobbies.

Take the example of the sugar sector. Policy has repeatedly been designed around the interests of millers, who have traditionally enjoyed political influence. Decisions on support prices, cane procurement, export, and other interventions aim to protect them. Cotton illustrates another failure of the agricultural system. Farmers often do not receive a fair share of the value generated by their crop, with middlemen and other parts of the supply chain capturing much of the margin. The result is reduced yields over the years.

Improving farm productivity means little if farmers remain trapped in inefficient markets and weak bargaining arrangements. A serious agricultural reform programme must address these structural problems. Smallholders need easier and cheaper access to bank credit, fairly priced and reliable inputs, protection against adulterated pesticides and poor-quality fertiliser and certified, high-yielding and climate-resilient seeds.

They also need better extension services that take modern farming techniques from research institutions to the field. Market reform is as important. Farmers should have greater direct access to efficient markets and buyers, instead of remaining dependent on middlemen. Better storage, grading, transport, digital market information and transparent price mechanisms can help reduce the gap between what consumers pay and what farmers receive. The proposed national system for estimating crop production is overdue. Reliable data is essential for planning imports, exports, storage and prices. But such a system will be useful only if its estimates are credible and produced through modern technology.

The question, therefore, is not whether the PM's intentions are honest. They are. The question is whether his government has what it takes to confront the entrenched interests that benefit from the system. Agricultural modernisation requires a comprehensive plan covering research, seeds, credit, inputs, extension, markets, water management and value chains, with the smallholder at its centre. It also requires political will to reform policies that currently favour powerful groups. Without these, no intervention will deliver the productive gains that farmers and the economy urgently need.

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Defeating malaria

PAKISTAN logged 1.8m malaria cases last year, revealing that sustained preparedness is not on the government's priority list. The disease, preventable but potentially fatal, is registering a worrying rise in Sindh: out of the 10,033 patients screened on a single day, 916 tested positive. The highest figure of 410 emerged from the Hyderabad division and

208 in Larkana. While there are four human malaria parasites, doctors say this is a vivax malaria spread due to relapse among patients who halt treatment once the fever subsides. The reasons remain obvious — the vector-borne illness persists where poverty, climate shocks and poor healthcare render medical care a privilege instead of a right. Meanwhile, doctors in Karachi maintain the city's patient caseload is much higher than what is documented. Some 25 cases are reported weekly, including a few dengue cases.

At a time when temperatures vary, monsoon patterns change and poverty is on the rise, mosquito breeding spots proliferate, becoming difficult to control. Additionally, the Pakistan Medical Association attributes the illness pattern to Karachi's dilapidated sewerage system along with weather conditions. Experts warn that without widespread preventive measures, strategy and vigilance in the province, the situation can spiral out of control. The truth is that only delivery matters. Annual transmission across the country, particularly in rural Sindh and KP, and areas of Balochistan, highlights the gaps in the healthcare infrastructure. There is no political commitment to address the injustices that feed malaria. Health units including rural health centres must have diagnostic supplies, medicines and staff on hand. Surveillance cannot be taken lightly, particularly when foreign aid is drying up. Malaria needs constant local investment as global health funds are exposed to pressure. Pakistan has to give precedence to its people's health to defeat vector-borne and other diseases. Without heightened deterrence, we will be helpless against potentially deadly outbreaks.

Published in Dawn, August 26th, 2026

Little to celebrate

BY now it has become almost tedious to read the same assessment from every global credit rating agency and lender — Pakistan's economy has stabilised, but risks remain. Moody's commentary on the country's economy accompanying its latest upgrade is simply a repetition of this review dressed up in a new number. And that tedium is itself the story: an economy that keeps producing the same verdict year after year is hardly holding steady; in fact, it is stuck. Macroeconomic indicators may not be falling, but nothing underneath them is moving either. Standing still while the rest of the world advances is nothing but a quiet form of decline. Moody's new rating, still highly speculative and seven notches below investment grade, is not a vote of confidence. It is merely an

acknowledgment that the country is marginally less likely to default than before. And yet it was an occasion for the prime minister to congratulate the nation as though we had turned the corner. This is the peculiar place Pakistani policymaking has settled into, where even minor technical adjustments are treated as milestones.

The picture Moody's has painted is unflattering. It points to a narrow export base, negligible FDI, heavy reliance on remittances, and a government that still leans on official and commercial borrowing to meet its external obligations. None of this describes an economy capable of standing on its own feet. It is being propped up by the IMF and rolled-over bilateral deposits. The governance language deserves more attention. The agency is blunt: weak rule of law, poor control of corruption, limited government effectiveness. These are not casual observations. These are the reasons investors continue to look elsewhere. Even the improvement in debt affordability that Moody's highlights comes with a caveat. Interest payments have reduced substantially over the previous year. Yet the figure is so high that practically nothing is left for the social and infrastructure investment the country needs. This improvement is a function of falling inflation and rate cuts, not any structural change. What all of these add up to is an economy that has been stabilised in the technical sense but the deeper conditions for real growth remain elusive. Real recovery would have looked different. Moody's upgrade is not a turning point; it is just a slightly better seat in the same waiting room.

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Dual approach

WITH regard to resolving the US-Iran stand-off, two distinct approaches are being pursued simultaneously. The more mature track involves Pakistan and other regional countries that are trying to revive the Islamabad MoU and ensure a peaceful denouement to this crisis.

In this regard, Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Asim Munir was in Tehran on Monday for talks with the Iranian leadership. The other — more combative — approach involves the US ramping up financial pressure on Iran through sanctions and what it calls

an “economic onslaught”. The US on Monday announced a fresh set of sanctions targeting Iran under the imaginatively titled ‘Operation Economic Outcast’.

Field Marshal Munir met the Iranian president, as well as other top leaders, in Tehran. One of the positive outcomes of this interaction was Iran’s affirmation that it remains committed to the Islamabad MoU. However, as the Iranian national security chief said, “we distrust America”. This mutual distrust remains the biggest obstacle in operationalising the MoU. The reality is that America’s ramping up sanctions on Iran will do little to build bridges with Tehran. If anything, it will harden attitudes there.

It should be remembered that Iran has survived punishing US sanctions for nearly half a century, and while the new curbs may increase the pain, they are unlikely to make Tehran yield. Moreover, there is little appetite amongst Iran’s major trading partners, particularly China, to toe Washington’s line. The announcement of new economic curbs is also an admission from the US that its strategy of defeating Iran on the battlefield has failed.

The fact that the Iranians are willing to engage with mediators, and are still interested in reviving the Islamabad MoU, means that a peaceful way out of this crisis can be found. After the CDF’s visit, the Omani foreign minister was in Tehran yesterday to discuss the situation in the Strait of Hormuz. If the Trump administration goes ahead with its ill-advised plan to further isolate Iran economically, or if it considers restarting military action, it will undoubtedly attract a matching response from Iran. Very few states in the region want a return to hostilities.

Therefore, both sides, particularly the US, need to take advantage of the renewed diplomatic push, and attempt to implement the salient features of the MoU. The US should drop its hostile rhetoric and attempt to reach a genuine understanding with Iran.

Washington’s aggression against the Islamic Republic has proved a disaster, and it would be best for the US to quickly exit the quagmire with whatever remains of its tattered honour. The Iranians, meanwhile, should restore the free flow of marine traffic through Hormuz, and rebuild damaged ties with their Arab Gulf neighbours.

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It is merely an acknowledgment that the country is marginally less likely to default than before. And yet it was an occasion for the prime minister to congratulate the nation as though we had turned the corner. This is the peculiar place Pakistani policymaking has settled into, where even minor technical adjustments are treated as milestones.

The picture Moody's has painted is unflattering. It points to a narrow export base, negligible FDI, heavy reliance on remittances, and a government that still leans on official and commercial borrowing to meet its external obligations. None of this describes an economy capable of standing on its own feet. It is being propped up by the IMF and rolled over bilateral deposits. The governance language deserves more attention.

The agency is blunt: weak rule of law, poor control of corruption, limited government effectiveness. These are not casual observations. These are the reasons investors continue to look elsewhere. Even the improvement in debt affordability that Moody's highlights comes with a caveat. Interest payments have reduced substantially over the previous year. Yet the figure is so high that practically nothing is left for the social and infrastructure investment the country needs.

This improvement is a function of falling inflation and rate cuts, not any structural change. What all of these add up to is an economy that has been stabilised in the technical sense but the deeper conditions for real growth remain elusive. Real recovery would have

looked different. Moody's upgrade is not a turning point; it is just a slightly better seat in the same waiting room.

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Lagging exports

WHEN the Senate committee met on Tuesday to ask trade officials why exports were not growing, they received a non-answer: the fault lay elsewhere. The TDAP chief executive set the tone, arguing that his organisation is blamed whenever exports stagnate. He indicated that the real culprits were electricity tariffs, financing costs and production expenses. No doubt, there is truth in this. But if the head of the TDAP, which exists to promote trade, is effectively telling legislators that promotion counts for little against the cost of doing business, the obvious question is what the organisation is for. The trade minister did not help either when he told the panel that he had advised the prime minister to pursue "reciprocal incentives", a phrase vague enough to mean almost anything and yet nothing. Pakistan's export base has been narrow and stagnant under successive commerce ministers who have all, at some point, said something similar.

Numbers were offered by trade officials as evidence of their efforts to increase shipments: 91 exhibitions, 11 delegations and preferential arrangements with 93 countries. However, none of this means very much. A country can attend every trade fair on the calendar and still lose market share if what it is selling has not diversified in structure or value addition. The committee would have done more for exporters by asking what came out of those 91 exhibitions in actual contracts and market entries than by letting the figure stand in for performance. In fact, there is little indication that the committee pushed back robustly against the claims and explanations. A parliamentary panel exists to interrogate the executive, not to serve as a stage for it to read its own press release into the record. Welcoming the TDAP's efforts while talking about the need for a strategy to boost the country's exports reflects a sorry reality: everyone agrees on the diagnosis, but nobody in government is willing to take responsibility and make an effort to cure the problem.

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Pipeline impasse

THE Iran-Pakistan natural gas pipeline — a project decades in the making — is once again in the news. Lawmakers questioned the status of the stalled scheme in the Senate on Tuesday. As per the petroleum minister, the prime minister has formed a committee to find a “mutually acceptable” solution. It should be remembered that Iran has initiated arbitration proceedings in France, and Pakistan risks paying billions in penalty for not implementing the intergovernmental agreement. Pakistan’s dilemma is genuine: the country is stuck between arbitration and hefty penalties if it abandons the project, and potentially ‘secondary sanctions’ by the US if it goes ahead with it. However, considering that Iran completed its part of the pipeline in 2011, and the grace period provided to Pakistan to build its part expired in 2024, a solution should have already been found.

Pakistan needs gas, and a steady supply from its western neighbour could address the shortages it faces. However, the issue here is more than one of logistics, project funding or gas pricing. It has fundamentally become a geopolitical concern, with the potential to spoil Pakistan-Iran relations unless handled carefully. On the other hand, American threats of sanctions cannot be ignored, keeping in mind Pakistan’s fragile economic situation. Instead of kicking the issue into the long grass, and waiting for a potentially adverse and expensive arbitration decision, Pakistan must address the pipeline question proactively. A comprehensive legal approach is required that protects national interests, while also maintaining a balance in ties with Iran and the US. One option would be to talk to the US and explain that any decision on the pipeline is best guided by Pakistan’s own economic interests. The Trump administration holds the current ruling set-up in Pakistan in high esteem and this aspect, coupled with Islamabad’s role as a mediator in the US-Iran conflict, can be leveraged to soften the American stance towards the project. Abandoning the pipeline would send the wrong message. The Iranians should also be kept in the loop to find a mutually beneficial way out. The destructive American and Israeli wars in the region will end one day. But Pakistan and its neighbours cannot change their geography, and must work to enhance friendship and trust.

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Hospital tragedy

WHERE does one begin? The mind goes first to the parents of the 14 newborns who died early Wednesday in the Mother and Child Health Ward of Islamabad's Pims Hospital. The heart falters at the sheer scale of their loss.

Their grief is shared across the country by people still struggling to comprehend how a tragedy of this magnitude was allowed to happen, and who must be held responsible. Multiple explanations have been offered for the fire: a short circuit, a spark, or an explosion involving an air-conditioning unit or its compressor. And every aspect of this incident unveils a new tragedy.

Officials say the purified oxygen that should have been a lifeline for infants in respiratory distress instead accelerated the blaze dramatically. Within moments, the resulting inferno claimed the lives of 14 of the 15 babies in the ward.

Eyewitnesses and parents described chaos: thick black smoke, shattered glass, locked or restricted doors, delayed rescue, and a near-total absence of proper evacuation protocols or functional fire-safety equipment. Some parents said they waited hours for help; official statements insisted fire tenders arrived within minutes of the emergency call. Rescue workers reported difficulty reaching the affected area.

Hospital officials later acknowledged that the ward was routinely kept locked to prevent the theft of newborns. Clearly, there was no contingency plan for an emergency of this nature. And that, itself, is a damning indictment of the state of public hospitals.

Equally frustrating has been the blame game that followed. Every stakeholder has been quick to point fingers even though few facts have been firmly established. The federal health secretary was swiftly suspended; scapegoated, many believe. But how far was he truly responsible? Is it fair, or even useful, to pin such disasters on individuals when the entire system remains broken? An inquiry committee has since been formed. That was

necessary, and it is hoped that it will be able to diagnose the reasons that led to this tragedy. Yet, a much deeper reckoning is required.

Removing a few officials will not prevent the next hospital fire. Pims is the largest and most prominent public hospital in the federal capital. It is the place where ordinary Pakistanis turn to in sickness, injury, and the hope of new life. Public hospitals in a country as populous as Pakistan need sustained resources and consistent support if they are to deliver even a basic standard of care and safety. Whether Pims ever received that support is a question that its administrators should be expected to answer.

Until Pakistan stops chronically underspending on healthcare, the safety standards and quality of care in state-run hospitals cannot be expected to improve, and tragedies like this one will continue to claim lives. The bigger question is whether the authorities are ready to address that challenge.

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Nepal-China floods

JUST before 8am Pakistan time on Wednesday, a glacier collapsed in the central Himalayas, triggering flash floods and mudslides along the Nepal-China border. The disaster killed hundreds and left many missing or displaced. According to international reports, a part of a glacier in or immediately adjacent to the Langtang Himal range near Nepal collapsed and plunged onto the valley floor, causing an avalanche of ice and rock to crash into the Lhunde River about 20 kilometres northeast of a border crossing. The ice and rock initially dammed the river, but the blockage eventually collapsed under the pressure, sending a wall of ice, mud, rock and water roaring downstream. At least 19 bridges and about 40km of roads were destroyed or washed away in the deluge. Multiple hydropower projects were damaged, and power, communications, and road access were severely disrupted in the affected region. Days on, more than 400 people have been confirmed dead, and over 1,500 are said to be missing across Nepal and China, including hundreds of foreign nationals. There are lessons in the incident for Pakistan which should not be ignored.

While this disaster affected a part of the world Pakistanis may seldom think about, our country faces analogous and, in some respects, more extensive risks. Pakistan holds more glaciers than any other place on the planet outside the polar regions. They feed the Indus, on which the nation's agriculture, power and drinking water depend. Rising temperatures have also created thousands of glacial lakes in Gilgit-Baltistan and KP, of which 33 are considered hazardous and liable to burst. The frequency of Glof events has been rising in recent years with global warming, which is why this is no longer some abstract risk. An ice avalanche, heatwave, heavy rain, or seismic activity can unleash here precisely what has unfolded in Nepal. To its credit, Pakistan has invested in monitoring and early-warning networks, as well as community training under Glof projects. The NDMA and the relevant agencies in GB and KP should be given the resources to take that programme forward with enhanced monitoring and surveillance capabilities and stronger disaster response mechanisms in high-risk areas. Nepal's catastrophe should put an end to any lingering notion that such disasters are black swan events. In a fast-warming region, they are foreseeable, and preparedness for any eventuality is the best option we may have available.

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Dissent aborted

EVER since the Taliban took power in 2021, international human rights bodies have criticised them for their harsh style of governance and curbs on fundamental freedoms inside Afghanistan. Most recently, Human Rights Watch condemned their "ruthless effort to suppress all dissent" after a new police law banned protests in the country; Amnesty International described the decree as "a sweeping assault on human rights in Afghanistan". Such draconian measures have made dissent a rare sight under the Taliban administration — especially when protests are met with brutal state force as seen in June. Given the Taliban's narrow worldview, the escalating repression — especially against women — is hardly surprising. Soon after they came to power, reports emerged of crackdowns on dissent and restrictions on women. In 2021, many protested publicly against armed Taliban patrolling; several deaths were reported. Rights bodies have also

pointed to the targeting of the Hazara community. Yet Western nations look away from the mess they created.

Oppressive regimes control narratives so that the state's version dominates. In an interconnected world, denying the right to peaceful assembly and marches will backfire. Such a degree of control is precisely what turns people against their rulers. With this latest measure, atrocities against women, the media and pro-democracy activists will be airbrushed out of reports. The world must put pressure on the Taliban to connect with ordinary Afghans and honour their earlier promises of maintaining inclusivity. In any democratic society, the state exercises moderation and acts only in cases of violence and hate speech. Not so in Afghanistan where the Taliban's senseless approach is codified in the law — meaning further tyranny against the people. Their actions have aborted any hope of progress. Rulers are accountable to the people. A rights-based order that protects people saves power from being seen as a dictatorship.

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Mineral treasure

OFFICIALS often state that Pakistan's untapped mineral wealth can be a potential 'game-changer'. The planning minister's recent comment while speaking to a think tank in New York, offers more of the same optimism.

According to Ahsan Iqbal, Pakistan's mineral endowment was estimated to be worth "more than \$7 trillion". It is not known how the minister arrived at that eye-watering figure. Mr Iqbal also mentioned that exploiting this mineral wealth required major investment, while the "country's volatile political climate" was the "primary deterrent" to attracting foreign capital in the sector. In other words, this massive bonanza cannot be tapped just yet.

There is little doubt that Pakistan has immense untapped mineral wealth, including critical minerals, which have become a hot commodity globally due to their use in emerging technologies. Independent assessments have endorsed Pakistan's mineral potential, although the state's estimates about the true value of this wealth, and those of third parties, vary considerably.

It is also a fact that currently, the mining sector's contribution to total GDP is miniscule. Pakistan's lack of funds, expertise and technology are the main impediments standing in the way of exploiting this potential. The Americans have expressed interest in our critical

minerals, while the Chinese have also invested in the mining sector. But the biggest obstacle in attracting foreign capital and expertise is the poor security situation in the areas where Pakistan's mineral wealth is concentrated: Balochistan and KP.

The prime need, therefore, is to improve the security situation if the state is serious about foreign investors putting their money into the mining sector. A securitised approach alone will not yield the desired results. As mining activity largely takes place in areas with high poverty, the investment must bring socioeconomic improvements to the lives of the local population. Residents living near mining projects must have first priority where training and jobs are concerned, while those firms profiting from the area should also invest in infrastructure improvement and corporate social responsibility.

Moreover, the trend so far has been for investors to dig up raw material and haul it away overseas for value-addition. To create a lasting economic impact, along with extraction, downstream industries are required which are capable of processing and adding value to the raw material. This will help create more jobs.

Pakistan's mineral wealth can bring dividends if it benefits the local people, and helps diversify the economy. Therefore, the state must concentrate on security, community development as well as policy continuity to attract foreign investment to the mining sector. Otherwise, Pakistan's mineral treasure worth trillions will end up becoming a 'resource curse'.

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CSS DAWN Vocabulary – August 2026

#	Word	Meaning	Sentence
1	Unequivocally	In a clear and unambiguous manner; leaving no doubt	Pakistan must unequivocally condemn all forms of terrorism and political violence.
2	Assuage	To reduce the intensity of an unpleasant feeling; to calm or relieve	The government introduced subsidies to assuage public anger over rising electricity prices.
3	Volatility	A tendency to change suddenly and unpredictably	Political volatility discourages foreign investors from making long-term commitments.
4	Chequered	Having a history containing both successes and failures	Pakistan and the United States have maintained a chequered relationship for decades.
5	Manifestation	A visible or clear expression of something	Rising extremism is a manifestation of deeper political and socioeconomic problems.
6	Uncompromising	Unwilling to make concessions or change one's position	An uncompromising diplomatic posture can make peaceful negotiations increasingly difficult.
7	Pragmatic	Dealing with problems practically rather than theoretically	Pakistan requires a pragmatic foreign policy based on its economic and security interests.
8	Compatriots	People belonging to the same country	Citizens must respect their compatriots regardless of ethnic, linguistic or sectarian differences.
	Chokepoint		
9		A narrow strategic passage through which movement can be restricted	The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints .

#	Word	Meaning	Sentence
10	Perilous	Extremely dangerous or risky	Climbers faced perilous conditions while attempting to reach the mountain summit.
11	Inferno	A very large and dangerously uncontrolled fire	The factory was transformed into an inferno within minutes after the explosion.
12	Fiefdom	An organisation or area controlled by one powerful person as if it were their private property	Political parties cannot strengthen democracy if their leaders continue to run them as personal fiefdoms .
13	Incumbent	A person currently holding an official position	The incumbent government faces mounting pressure to introduce economic reforms.
14	Gauntlet	A challenge, especially one that invites someone to respond or compete	The opposition effectively threw down the gauntlet by demanding immediate electoral reforms.
15	Proliferate	To increase or spread rapidly	Illegal settlements continued to proliferate despite international criticism.
16	Sporadic	Occurring irregularly or occasionally	Sporadic violence along the border has undermined efforts to restore stability.
17	Coercive	Using force or threats to make someone act in a particular way	Coercive population policies often violate individual rights and undermine public trust.
18	Endemic	Regularly found or deeply established in a particular place or system	Corruption has become endemic in institutions where accountability mechanisms remain weak.
19	Brutish	Cruel, violent and lacking sensitivity	Brutish methods of interrogation have no place in a modern criminal justice system.

# Word	Meaning	Sentence
20 Archaic	Extremely old-fashioned or belonging to an earlier period	Pakistan must replace archaic administrative procedures with modern digital systems.
21 Imperative	Absolutely necessary or extremely important	Judicial reform is imperative for strengthening the rule of law.
22 Modus Operandi	A particular method or way of doing something	Security agencies studied the terrorists' modus operandi to prevent similar attacks.
23 Thwart	To prevent someone from accomplishing something	Effective intelligence-sharing can help thwart terrorist attacks before they occur.
24 Vanquish	To defeat completely	Military force alone cannot vanquish extremism without addressing its underlying causes.
25 Complacency	A feeling of excessive satisfaction that prevents awareness of danger	Economic stability should not lead policymakers into complacency about structural reforms.
26 Punitive	Intended as punishment	Excessively punitive tariffs can damage trade without necessarily changing economic behaviour.
27 Diversification	The process of developing greater variety to reduce dependence on one area	Export diversification is essential if Pakistan wants to reduce its dependence on textiles.
28 Inclement	Unpleasant or severe, especially referring to weather	Rescue operations were suspended because of inclement weather in the mountainous region.
29 Extricate	To free oneself or someone from a difficult situation	Diplomatic negotiations may help the country extricate itself from a prolonged regional conflict.

#	Word	Meaning	Sentence
30	Bombastic	Using impressive-sounding language with little real meaning; pompous	Bombastic political rhetoric often makes diplomatic disputes more difficult to resolve.
31	Quagmire	A complicated and difficult situation from which escape is hard	Prolonged military intervention can trap powerful states in a geopolitical quagmire .
32	Orwellian	Characterised by oppressive control, surveillance or manipulation of information	Critics described the restrictions on journalists as Orwellian measures designed to control information.
33	Retribution	Punishment inflicted in revenge for a wrongdoing	Journalists should be able to criticise public institutions without fear of official retribution .
34	Juncture	A particular and important point in events or time	Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where economic decisions could shape its future for decades.
35	Scrutiny	Careful and detailed examination	Major agreements involving national resources should be subjected to parliamentary scrutiny .
36	Rigorous	Extremely thorough, careful and strict	Foreign investment agreements require rigorous legal and financial examination.
37	Impunity	Freedom from punishment despite wrongdoing	No democratic society can tolerate officials acting with impunity .
38	Intransigence	Refusal to change one's views or agree about something	Political intransigence prevented the government and opposition from reaching a compromise.
39	Carnage	The violent killing of a large number of people	The international community called for an immediate end to the carnage caused by the conflict.

# Word	Meaning	Sentence
40 Beleaguered	Experiencing serious difficulties, criticism or pressure	The beleaguered government struggled to restore public confidence after months of political instability.
41 Caveat	A warning, condition or qualification attached to something	The economic outlook is encouraging, but it comes with the caveat that structural reforms remain necessary.
42 Trepidation	A feeling of fear or anxiety about something that may happen	Citizens viewed the escalating political confrontation with considerable trepidation .
43 Stalemate	A situation in which neither side can make progress	Months of negotiations ended in a diplomatic stalemate because neither side was willing to compromise.
44 Modus Vivendi	An arrangement allowing opposing parties to coexist peacefully despite disagreements	Regional powers must establish a modus vivendi if lasting peace is to emerge in the Middle East.
45 Subterfuge	A deceptive strategy used to conceal one's true intentions	Diplomatic subterfuge can undermine trust between negotiating parties.
46 Jingoism	Extreme and aggressive nationalism, especially in foreign policy	Media jingoism during military tensions can inflame public emotions and obstruct diplomacy.
47 Preposterous	Completely unreasonable, absurd or contrary to common sense	The claim that economic problems can be solved without structural reforms is preposterous .
48 Regurgitate	To repeat information or ideas without proper analysis or originality	Candidates should critically analyse arguments rather than merely regurgitate memorised material.

#	Word	Meaning	Sentence
49	Ephemerality	The quality of lasting for only a short time	The ephemerality of political power should remind leaders that institutions are more important than individuals.
50	Excoriating	Criticising someone or something very severely	The opposition issued an excoriating critique of the government's handling of the electoral dispute.