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Udaipur killing

THE grisly beheading of a Hindu man by two Muslim suspects in the Indian city of Udaipur must be unequivocally condemned.

The suspects reportedly committed the crime after the victim uploaded content on social media apparently supporting the BJP politician who had earlier made blasphemous remarks about the Holy Prophet (PBUH). The victim had been arrested a few weeks ago over the posts but the matter was resolved after members of the Muslim and Hindu communities held a 'peace meeting'.

After the murder, the state of Rajasthan remains on edge, with Udaipur under curfew to prevent communal flare-ups.

While the Indian authorities need to fully investigate the crime and punish the culprits, there must be no rush to blame Pakistan for this atrocity — as some in the Indian government have done. Moreover, the murder must not be exploited by communal forces seeking to further demonise India's Muslims.

Indian officials claim one of the suspects was linked to a Pakistan-based religious group and had visited Karachi in the past. With regard to these claims, the Foreign Office has said that "we categorically reject any such insinuations".

If Indian investigators have solid evidence linking the suspects to any organisation based in this country, instead of indulging in a media trial they need to share such proof with Pakistan. Local authorities — if credible evidence is received — must follow up and if a link is indeed established, start the legal process. But India must not jump the gun — as it is prone to doing in Pakistan's case.

No doubt, Pakistan continues to wrestle with the demons of extremism. Yet in India, thanks to the toxic politics engendered by Hindutva, Hindu majoritarianism and fanaticism are being promoted at the state level by excluding Muslims from the mainstream and treating them as perpetual outsiders and 'enemies'.

The crime committed in Udaipur did not happen in a vacuum.

Ever since the BJP took power in 2014, the state has either kept quiet as Muslims have been lynched, attacked or disallowed from freely partaking in their cultural and religious practices, or it has actively participated in their exclusion by

legislating discriminatory citizenship laws. Moreover, senior members of India's ruling class — such as the UP chief minister — have constantly indulged in Muslim-baiting, while the insulting remarks directed at Islam's most sacred figure crossed a red line.

It is in such an atmosphere of hate that the crime in Udaipur took place. While there can be no justification, context is important. Clearly, if Indian authorities fail to address the rising trend of Hindu extremism in their country, radical Muslim elements will emerge to counter it.

Meanwhile, progressive elements in India must ensure that this reprehensible crime is not used as a rallying cry by the Sangh Parivar to further tighten the screws on India's Muslim citizens, and perpetuate the cycle of hate.

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Unacceptable demand

THERE'S an element of smoke and mirrors in the negotiations between the Pakistan government and the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan in Kabul under the aegis of the Afghan Taliban. As time goes on, it seems apparent the TTP's game plan is to appear as though it wants to resolve the impasse with the Pakistani state through dialogue, while sabotaging any chance of a resolution.

The latest development on that front is that the umbrella organisation of militant groups is refusing to back down from what it describes as its primary demand: the reversal of Fata's merger with KP. Aside from this, it is also insisting on the withdrawal of security forces from the tribal districts, amnesty for its fighters and the enforcement of Sharia in Malakand Division. But, as Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah stated at a press conference, the TTP has been informed that the rollback of the merger is non-negotiable even while its other demands, he said, were under consideration. The TTP know they risked antagonising their hosts, the Afghan Taliban, if they declined to take part in the talks. The Kabul regime, which stands virtually isolated, is in dire need of financial assistance and may be hoping that successfully mediating a resolution between Pakistan and the TTP would give it a legitimacy of sorts in the eyes of the world. Moreover, its strategically important relationship with Pakistan had been coming under strain on account of the TTP's relentless cross-border attacks.

However, the TTP has upped the ante by setting a condition impossible for Pakistan to meet. No state can afford to cede sovereignty to militants under any circumstances. We saw what transpired after a similar mistake in 2009 when extremists were allowed to take control in Malakand Division. The exercise yielded little aside from traumatising those subjected to the brutality of the militants and whetting the latter's appetite for more territorial domination, which necessitated yet another military operation to take back control of the area. Despite an indefinite extension in April of the ceasefire between Pakistan and the TTP, prospects of peace between the two, as described in a recent UN report, are bleak. Negotiating with extremists is tricky; no peace treaty with them has lasted beyond a few months. Attempting it with an umbrella organisation with multiple militant groups is even more so especially when some do not seem to care that the alternative to failure of talks is yet more war.

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Tough times ahead

THE finance ministry's projection of 15pc inflation, much higher than the targeted rate of 11.5pc, during the new financial year, is perhaps the first official admission of the potential impact that fiscal stabilisation will have on the lives of most Pakistanis. The tough economic conditions will not only kick up inflation, they will also slow down the growth rate and lead to higher unemployment going forward. Many would argue that the inflation estimates are still on the lower side considering the elevated global energy and other commodity prices that the government has to pass on to consumers to stay solvent. The monthly economic update and outlook report for June released by the finance ministry concedes that the interest rates will also have to be jacked up further in the near term. But the monetary tightening is unlikely to have any significant effect on the inflation outlook. The reasons are obvious. Much of the domestic inflation is being produced by rising costs of energy, food and industrial raw material that we have to import to meet local demand.

To say that the coming months will be extremely tough for Pakistanis, who will see their incomes erode and living standards decline further, does not capture the current impact of the deteriorating macroeconomic imbalances on the lives of low- to middle-income groups. A report, for example, has recently pointed out

that the reversal of oil subsidies since May has led to increased school dropout rates among female students. The last three years of two-digit inflation have already led most households to cut back on health and other essential expenditure and compromise on the quality of food. True, the government does not have any control over exogenous factors such as global commodity markets and the ongoing Ukrainian war that are responsible for the elevated energy prices and supply disruptions. But it could have mitigated the adverse impacts of external shocks by putting its fiscal house in order, scrapping wasteful expenditure and pursuing prudent growth policies.

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Uncertainty remains in Punjab

THE Supreme Court's order to hold a re-election for the office of chief minister of Punjab on July 22 may have temporarily settled the ongoing battle for power between the PML-N-led ruling coalition and the opposition PTI-PML-Q, but it might have also created more constitutional and legal complexities.

For many, the decision appears to represent more of a 'political compromise' than a strictly legal interpretation.

The court ruled on a petition filed by the opposition alliance against a majority Lahore High Court judgement that restored the status quo ante for a vote recount — without the votes of 25 PTI defectors — in the Punjab chief minister's election on April 16, besides ordering a run-off election for the top office in case neither candidate secured the House majority of 186 members.

The Lahore High Court verdict was guided by the Supreme Court's ruling given in May in a presidential reference that the votes of dissident or defecting lawmakers "cast against their parliamentary party's directives" in the election for the offices of the prime minister and chief ministers, or on the money bill, cannot be counted under Article 63(A) of the Constitution.

The Lahore High Court was applying the top court's decision 'retrospectively' when it restored the status quo ante to order a vote recount. The Lahore High Court decision did not question the validity or legality of the election per se.

Though the detailed judgement is yet to come, the top court on Friday apparently invalidated the entire proceedings of the provincial assembly and election of the chief minister held on April 16 under yet another Lahore High Court order.

That is not all. Since the re-election will be held five days after the by-polls on 20 seats that have fallen vacant after the disqualification of PTI defectors who voted for Hamza Shehbaz, the new chief minister will now be elected by a new, reconstituted House with a changed electoral college. Some legal experts say there is no provision for this in the Constitution.

Perhaps the decision in this case should have been based on the merits of the law rather than what is seen to be a compromise resolution of the dispute between the rival parties.

With the latest verdict, the judiciary seems to have unintentionally entered the political arena, which is not desirable. Politically, the decision is likely to prolong the prevalent uncertainty in the province.

Punjab has been in the grip of one crisis after another, with the fledgling Hamza Shehbaz government focusing primarily on its survival. The crisis has weakened governance in the province, with those in authority unsure of where they stand. Will the outcome of the upcoming by-polls and re-election of the chief minister cool political temperatures and end the political uncertainty? We see little chance of that happening anytime soon.

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Turbulence in tech

Editorial Published July 2, 2022 - Updated about 5 hours ago 0

THE party seems to have cooled considerably for the Pakistani start-up scene. With some of the world's biggest technology companies taking massive hits to their valuations this year, capitalists no longer seem as keen to shower funds on up-and-coming ventures. In a sign that investors are clutching their purse strings ever tighter, start-ups in Pakistan managed to raise only \$103.8m in the April-June quarter — a 40pc decline from the preceding quarter, when flows had touched \$173m. The Pakistani start-up scene has recently been rattled by a series of disappointing developments. Some of the biggest names in the nascent

industry have announced retrenchments and lay-offs to cope with industry headwinds. Companies that became household names as the economy boomed in recent years — Careem, Swvl, VavaCars, Airlift etc — have either rolled back services or even suspended operations, leaving customers in the lurch.

It is understandable why both proven and unproven ventures are facing challenges in raising funds. The Pakistani economy is headed into a period of painful course correction, which is likely to result in lower consumer spending on the type of value-added, lifestyle improvement services offered by many start-ups. Several of the biggest ventures had grown rapidly during the pandemic era — for example, grocery and food delivery start-ups, which benefited from lockdowns by offering users the convenience and safety of shopping from home. Such companies are now facing new questions regarding the sustainability of their growth model as the world adjusts to the post-lockdown realities. As mentioned in a report yesterday on our business pages, investors are now reportedly asking enterprises to hit their break-even point as soon as possible, instead of focusing solely on revenue mobilisation. This indicates a shift in investors' priorities from wanting to see companies 'grow at all costs' to pushing them towards a 'grow at reasonable cost' model. Start-up funding is a risky undertaking, and with the cost of funding going up as the US and major global economies jack up interest rates, it has become riskier still. However, periods of adversity such as the one being faced right now are sometimes also a great opportunity for growing industries. Difficult conditions push entrepreneurs to work with more efficiency and adapt in order to survive against the odds. The Pakistani tech industry has great potential to create a mark on the global IT market, but it must first prove itself in this trial by fire.

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Environmental cost

THE collective impact of climate-disaster-health hazards are already taking a huge toll on Pakistan's fragile economy. If corrective measures are not instituted quickly, these losses could rise to more than 9pc of the annual GDP. As climate experts have been pointing out for a long time, global warming is linked to disease control and food insecurity. The findings of a new report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific reveal as

much. The report, titled Pathways to Adaptation and Resilience in South and Southwest Asia, offers a detailed analysis of the combined economic impact of the confluence of biological and climate change-induced disasters in South and Southwest Asia. For example, monsoon flooding in South Asia in August 2020 aggravated the incidence of malaria and dengue across the region, putting extra burden on health systems strained by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the report, South and Southwest Asia already lose an average \$161bn every year to weather events related to climate change. Were the situation to worsen even moderately it would drive up the combined economic loss to \$217bn, while the worst-case scenario would be expected to extract a collective cost of \$322bn. In monetary terms, India is expected to record up to \$225bn, Pakistan \$26bn and Turkey \$24bn. But the impact would be felt much more in Pakistan, with losses equalling 9.1pc of its GDP as compared to 8.7pc in Nepal and 8.1pc in India. Combined with the already precarious socioeconomic conditions and increased vulnerability to climate change, this does not bode well for Pakistan in several respects.

The report, like previous documents, emphasises the increased intensity, occurrence and length of extreme dry spells and drought conditions in the region. There is plenty of evidence to show that countries that invested in sustainable development fare much better in adapting to the new realities of climate change. Pakistan needs to learn from them to have a fighting chance of saving itself from the devastating impact of climate-induced disasters.

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Flooding alert

THE Gilgit-Baltistan government has issued an alert about the possible flooding of areas along river banks and nullahs owing to the rapidly melting glaciers amid an ongoing heatwave. The next few days will be critical — especially for communities living under constant threat in the downstream areas and near lakes and rivers. In recent years the region has been hit by an increasing number of natural disasters — flash floods, glacial lake outburst flooding, landslides and earthquakes — as a result of the changing global climate. Reports suggest that the incidence of landslides and flash floods has increased in both winter and summer after the 2010 super floods. According to a report, melting glaciers in the

Himalayan, Hindu Kush and Karakoram mountain ranges have created thousands of glacial lakes in the north. In the last couple of months, for instance, people from several districts of the region have seen their roads, bridges, homes and livelihoods washed away by floods triggered by torrential rains and glacial lake outbursts caused by fast-melting glaciers. The recurrent flooding has damaged crops and trees, and displaced communities. In some cases, lives have been lost. Even though the government and its disaster management agencies claim they have a plan to deal with the situation, past experience shows that help always arrives a little too late.

Disaster management has remained a problematic area in the country, despite the investments of billions of rupees and the creation of new agencies to deal with catastrophic situations. That is mainly because the role of the disaster management agencies has remained limited largely to the provision of rescue services and shelter for the victims. There's no comprehensive strategy to minimise the impact of disasters, especially floods, on the people and economy. A few weeks ago, the federal climate change minister warned that large parts of the country could face floods in the aftermath of torrential rains this year and that there was a "clear risk of flooding in Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, Islamabad and other big cities". Has anything been done to prepare for such a situation? No. True, no one can avert natural disasters. But this should not stop governments from taking steps to mitigate their impact. With experts predicting more extreme natural events in the years ahead, because of the effects of climate change, it is imperative that the role of disaster management agencies is redefined and investments are made in communities that are more vulnerable to dangerous weather events.

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Assaulting journalists

ANOTHER day, another citizen roughed up for speaking his mind. The assault on veteran journalist Ayaz Amir by unidentified men in Lahore late Friday night is just the latest reminder that speaking the bitter truth never goes unpunished by those who have been allowed to run amok in this land of the pure. What was Mr Amir's 'crime' that he was subjected to such brutish treatment? That he had not pulled any punches when he went after the military, real estate tycoons and

former prime minister Imran Khan while addressing the latter during a symposium he had addressed a day earlier? Mr Amir had been quite unreserved while holding the establishment responsible for the political crisis faced by the country, but he had also criticised the PTI government for acting as a facilitator while it seized greater control of the levers of power. He had also slammed Mr Khan for pandering to real estate tycoons and giving them too much space to tear and destroy while lining their own pockets. The public had found his speech refreshing for its audacity. Even PTI supporters were supportive of the journalist's decision to speak the ugly truth in public. Yet somebody, clearly, was not amused.

The question of who is behind the assault on Mr Amir may be as yet officially unanswered, and, as in other such cases, it is likely to remain so. Nevertheless, some are quite convinced that the usual suspects were involved. Whatever the case may be, the sheer brazenness of the attack should give us some pause. It seems that the message is that one should expect prompt 'disciplining' if they cross the line. Never mind the age of the victim, their health, or their standing in society: hired guns will be set upon you to inflict physical and psychological pain if you step too hard on a powerful ego. Tragically, this is Pakistan on the eve of the 75th anniversary of its independence.

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Skyrocketing prices

IT is a record that the new government would have wished to see remain unbroken. Inflation in the month of June smashed through the 20pc ceiling for the first time since December 2008, registering at a bruising 21.3pc for the month. A weakening of the rupee — caused in part by the new government's policy uncertainty and waffling statements regarding the resumption of the IMF programme — added to woes by inflating the cost of imports even further.

The 13-year inflation peak came on the back of runaway fuel prices, which — as part of measures to woo the IMF — were unfettered from an unsustainable price cap imposed by the PTI government in late February.

Worryingly, food inflation registered a staggering 25.9pc increase over the previous year, threatening the food security of those most vulnerable to

inflationary shocks. There has been a major crisis due to an edible oil shortage following an export ban imposed on the commodity by Indonesia, the world's largest exporter of edible oil. Ghee and cooking oil prices were rising nearly on a weekly basis at one point as hoarders and miscreants sought to take advantage of the demand-supply shortfall in the absence of any regulatory oversight by the government.

Not only edible oil, traders also looked to take advantage of the prevailing uncertainty to jack up prices of meat, fruit and vegetables in both urban and rural centres as the government failed to put in place any regulatory mechanisms to prevent price-gouging. What should really worry the government is that food inflation in rural areas surged to 27pc year-on-year last month, putting major pressure on rural incomes during a time when most crops remained extremely water-stressed and depleted. A wheat shortage is also looming on the horizon, which is likely to make it even more costly for the average citizen to eat.

The economy is going through a painful adjustment at the moment and all markets are in disequilibrium as demand and supply adjust to inflationary pressures. Some sellers are seeking to take advantage of the prevailing disorder by creating artificial shortages or jacking up prices based on different pretexts. Economics dictates that prices will eventually reach a rational level as buyers adjust their spending and sellers realise they cannot continue to make unnatural profits during an economic downturn.

However, the government cannot give profiteers and hoarders a free hand till the markets reach a new equilibrium. Global market conditions may be uncontrollable, but oversight of local markets is still very much in the state's domain. The government must act in coordination with the provinces to take strict action against exploitative practices and protect citizens' interests where it can. Taking a back seat during a period when the average citizen is being crushed under unprecedented economic pain could prove politically disastrous for the PML-N and its allies.

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Wise counsel

AMIDST the din of hateful rhetoric that tends to dominate the public discourse when discussing Muslims in today's India, that country's top court has made welcome observations regarding the incendiary comments spewed by a BJP spokesperson during a TV debate.

While hearing a number of complaints against the ruling party leader, the Indian supreme court observed that Nupur Sharma's "loose tongue" had "set the country on fire" and that she "should apologise to the whole nation".

The court's firm words need to be compared to the often arrogant and insensitive remarks emanating from India's executive branch, as well as heavyweights within the BJP, where Muslims are concerned.

The insulting remarks directed at the Holy Prophet (PBUH) by the party spokeswoman last month had elicited a strong reaction from India's Muslims as well as Muslim states, with demonstrations sweeping the country and around 20 states summoning Indian envoys to express their displeasure.

Linked to the controversy was the grisly beheading of a Hindu tailor in Udaipur late last month allegedly by two Muslim suspects after the victim had reportedly supported the blasphemous remarks on social media.

In order to prevent communal frenzy, responsible pillars of the Indian state, as well as civil society, need to speak up against bigotry, much as the supreme court has done.

Unfortunately, under the BJP's watch hate-mongers and Muslim-baiters have been given free rein to demonise the community, while the state itself has played a central role in legalising anti-Muslim discrimination. This has resulted in the 'otherisation' of Indian Muslims, as well as extremist reactions such as the one witnessed in Udaipur.

The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar want nothing more than there to be a permanent state of conflict between Hindus and Muslims. That is why progressive elements in India must play a bigger role in countering anti-Muslim venom.

Moreover, India is extremely sensitive to outside critique. That is why foreign states must call out New Delhi if it continues its prejudiced policies.

In this regard, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif raised the issue of Islamophobia in India with the US ambassador, while the American secretary of state had earlier expressed concern about “rising attacks on people and places of worship” in India.

The US needs to ask India to do more to protect its minorities, just as it asks its rivals — such as China — and countries like Pakistan to protect religious freedom. As for the rich Gulf Arab states, they also need to send a message to India that trade ties will be affected if anti-Muslim violence persists.

At the core of the matter is the fact that the Sangh Parivar and its political underlings refuse to acknowledge India’s Muslims as full citizens of the country, with fundamental rights to be protected. Fuelling the fires of communalism for petty political gains is dangerous and can have a long-lasting impact on India’s stability.

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Hazardous waste

GIVEN we have not yet developed streamlined systems for managing locally produced hazardous waste, we are inviting disaster by becoming a dumping ground for global hazardous waste. A parliamentary committee on climate change was informed on Thursday that massive amounts of such material was being imported from a number of countries, including the UK, Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia among others. Last year, the UK alone dispatched 40,000 tonnes of waste to Pakistan, while Iran and the UAE accounted for 25,000 and 20,000 tonnes, respectively. As explained in the meeting, the recycling industry across the country extracted metals such as gold, copper and aluminium from the imported waste. The economic benefits of developing countries importing waste from developed nations are lost when the practice is not properly regulated. Indeed, many environmentalists criticise the international waste trade for reinforcing inequality on a global scale.

Pakistan itself generates 30m tonnes of municipal solid waste annually. Of this, 10pc to 14pc is categorised as hazardous waste, which includes hospital waste,

e-waste and pesticides. Our surface and groundwater resources are already under threat from climate change and unsustainable industrial and agricultural practices. The lack of comprehensive legislation and an unscientific approach towards recycling — including inappropriate handling and disposal of hazardous waste — is exacerbating the issue, and posing risks to human health through diversified channels. There are various ways of recycling hazardous waste. These include reclamation, which entails processing a material to salvage a reusable product; combustion for energy recovery that involves burning the hazardous waste as a fuel or using it as an ingredient to create fuel; etc. However, such recycling requires significant safeguards to be in place if the process itself is not to pose risks. That is also an area where properly implemented regulations come in. But there is a lot of ground to cover before we can arrive at that level of competency. Consider that in 2019, 624 containers carrying all manner of waste were dumped along the country's coastline, with the private party that imported it unable to be traced. It is vital that the government devise policies and related implementation mechanisms to effectively collect and manage waste as well as rationalise the import of hazardous waste. Last week, the federal cabinet approved the National Waste Management Policy 2022 which aims to do precisely that. In this endeavour, the provinces, particularly their environment protection agencies, have a critical role to play.

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Mob 'justice'

OVER the past few days, a string of deadly incidents has been reported from Karachi in which enraged mobs have lynched individuals over allegations of their involvement in criminal activities. Moreover, most of the incidents have been reported from one particular area of the metropolis: Orangi Town and its peripheries. Last Tuesday, a mob got hold of a suspect, shot him and set him on fire after the victim had apparently shot a citizen during a robbery attempt. A few days earlier, two suspects were lynched under similar circumstances, though relatives of the men claimed they were innocent. Meanwhile, early in June, two men met the same grisly end after a mob caught up with them following a reported robbery incident. These shocking episodes reflect a highly disturbing trend which needs to be curbed immediately before the law of the jungle starts to prevail in this unwieldy city.

While violent street crime is a valid concern and citizens are on edge, such instances of vigilante justice should simply not be tolerated. This is especially so when incidents have occurred in the past of people being lynched after being accused of involvement in a crime, only for it to emerge afterwards that they were murdered due to personal vendettas. Considering that the recent lynchings have occurred in the same area, police need to be on alert, while those involved in this vigilantism must face the law. Moreover, the fact is that in order to prevent such barbaric acts from happening, the police must seriously improve their performance where law enforcement is concerned. While mischievous elements do try to exploit the situation and settle scores, if the general public saw that the police was more active in nabbing and punishing criminals, perhaps they would hand suspects over to the law enforcers instead of delivering 'justice' themselves. There can be no space for lynchings in a civilised society and law-enforcement officials need to confront this ugly trend before it results in further lawlessness.

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Warming ties

BILATERAL ties with the US are clearly on the mend after an extensive rough patch under the PTI government. While the 'Cablegate' saga, as elucidated by former prime minister Imran Khan, was an attempt by the superpower to get rid of his government, Washington has repeatedly claimed it had nothing to do with Mr Khan's removal. Interestingly, there are now reports that Mr Khan's party is trying to reopen channels with America in an effort to 'forget the past'. Since the departure of the PTI government, frosty ties have warmed at a quick pace. Pakistan's foreign minister met his American counterpart in New York in May while later that month the first full-time American ambassador in nearly four years took up his post in Islamabad. More recently, a number of visitors from Washington have been in Pakistan to improve ties. These include the US special representative on business and commercial affairs, as well as the assistant secretary of state dealing with international narcotics and law enforcement.

While the US has undeniably played a role in making and breaking governments across the globe, there is little evidence it hatched the plot to send Mr Khan's administration home. After all, governments are not destabilised by ciphers; there

are other, more sinister methods usually involving intelligence agencies at work to achieve this end. The PTI, unfortunately, played up the Cablegate affair to cater to its domestic vote bank and discredit its opponents. Yet the impact this manoeuvre had on Pakistan-US ties was anything but positive. There is now a need to rebuild bilateral ties and address structural weaknesses that stand in the way of their improvement.

For starters, ties must be based on an equal relationship, stressing respect, particularly for sovereignty, and go beyond the transactionalism that has marked relations since the Cold War era. As a developing country, Pakistan needs American help in realising its full economic potential. The US can help in removing barriers that stand in the way of Pakistani products reaching American markets. Additionally, more American investors should consider putting their money in this country and tapping its human resource potential. Collaborations in academia and other sectors can also be taken forward. The US should also consider restarting the strategic dialogue that Pakistan desires. Yet what Pakistan should not do is take diktat, however subtle, from any foreign power. Who this country trades with; who this country builds political and military alliances with should solely be the decision of its government and people. No foreign power has the right to interfere in these affairs. After all, the double standard is hard to miss if the US lectures Pakistan about not trading with Russia, or the 'pitfalls' of CPEC, yet looks the other way if India trades with Moscow. A rejuvenated, beneficial Pakistan-US relationship is worth pursuing, as long as this country is not asked to take sides in global power games.

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LNG emergency

PAKISTAN is looking to buy a lot of LNG amid ongoing countrywide blackouts. The government has just released one of its biggest LNG purchase tenders ever to procure 10 cargoes for delivery through September. Even if its tenders get a response from the international suppliers — considering a restricted LNG market because of the Russia-Ukraine conflict — it will cost Islamabad around \$1bn to purchase all those cargoes at current spot market rates. The problem is that it does not have sufficient cash at the moment to buy even a single cargo at present prices.

In the last two months, the government has thrice tried to procure LNG for July delivery. Only one supplier responded the last time, asking the highest-ever price of just below \$40mmBtu. The authorities rejected the offer since it was not affordable.

No wonder the coalition government has approached Qatar, one of the world's largest LNG suppliers with whom Pakistan has had two long-term contracts, for additional shipments of 400mmcf to 500mmcf a month on 'deferred' payments to curb the growing power outages in the country.

But the Qatari authorities do not appear enthusiastic about the request due to the massive demand for its gas from Europe as well as owing to Pakistan's failure to remove bureaucratic impediments to the establishment of a merchant LNG terminal near Karachi.

In order to appease Doha, the minister of state for petroleum, Musadik Malik, has again written to Qatar, expressing Pakistan's "desire to enhance the number of cargoes of LNG from Qatar under the two existing long-term sale purchase agreements on deferred payments". At the same time, he has sought to reassure Doha that "the government in Islamabad is diligently working to do away with the stumbling blocks ... to accelerate the process of investment by Qatar Energy in infrastructure development for LNG import". Will that be enough for Doha to commit more gas to Pakistan at a time it can sell it to any one for cash?

That's not the only issue the government has to deal with while ramping up LNG supplies. The absence of adequate infrastructure to handle additional gas could also be a problem, which can be tackled in a few months by allowing existing terminals to expand their re-gasification capacity now and removing bureaucratic hurdles in the way of the construction of new ones on a business-to-business model without any government guarantees involved.

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The invisible half

WHAT better illustrates the Afghan Taliban's misogynistic and mediaeval worldview than the fact that not a single woman was invited to the three-day gathering in Kabul of over 3,500 clerics and 'people of influence' from around Afghanistan? As though to reinforce the irrelevance of women and the fact they

are not considered individuals in their own right, the Taliban asserted that women would indeed be represented, but only by their fathers and sons. The meeting, where participants pledged allegiance to the Taliban and its reclusive leader Mullah Hibatullah, failed to address contentious issues such as allowing girls access to secondary education. No wonder that, on Sunday, Afghan women activists in self-exile denounced the Taliban as illegitimate rulers because their regime was endorsed by those who represented only half the nation.

The Afghan Taliban have proved they are no different from the earlier cohort that ruled much of Afghanistan from 1996 till 2001. The extreme manifestations of misogyny that marked that first, brutal regime are apparent this time around as well. One objective is to make women invisible by excising them from government jobs, closing off avenues of education to them and by ordering them to cover themselves up in all-encompassing burqas. Such steps, as well as the ban on women travelling alone by air or on inter-city routes by road, are calculated to strip them of their agency and financial independence. The effect that these repressive measures are having on their mental well-being can only be imagined. That the Taliban leader, when he spoke at last week's gathering, issued a rebuke to those urging the hard-line regime to keep its word to the international community about respecting women's rights, indicates a change in attitude is not on the cards. The only way out of this depressing situation may be for Muslim countries to continue to engage with the Taliban and impress upon them the long-term damage they are inflicting on their nation by trampling on the rights of half its population.

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Miftah's misery

It cannot be easy to be finance minister in times like these, with friend and foe alike gunning for you over difficult decisions that you were forced to take in the greater national interest. This is the sorry predicament Miftah Ismail finds himself in at the moment, merely two and a half months since he took over arguably the most difficult job in Pakistan.

It is unclear why he is being given such short shrift. It appears from a recent statement made by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif during a TV show that some within the party hold Mr Ismail responsible for eroding the PML-N's political

capital. However, this is quite an amnesic reaction on the part of these individuals, considering that the risks to the PML-N's electoral prospects arising from the economic adjustments the coalition government was going to be forced to undertake were extensively discussed and understood. The party knew what it was getting into when it decided to stick it out in Islamabad after ousting the PTI from power.

There was nothing easy or simple about the task Mr Ismail was handed, but he had a plan even before he was anointed finance minister. In fact, it seems that the government got delayed in its response to the economic crisis because individuals within the PML-N initially did not want to give Mr Ismail the go-ahead to execute his agenda.

This was apparent after the London episode, when most of the PML-N cabinet was summoned to the UK for deliberations with Mian Nawaz Sharif on the best way forward. Insider accounts of that meeting indicate that former finance minister Ishaq Dar did not agree with Mr Ismail.

Mr Dar apparently had very different ideas about how to extricate Pakistan from the current economic morass. It seems his misgivings never really went away, even though Mr Ismail was allowed to start rolling out his plan in bits and pieces. If rumours are anything to go by, Mr Dar plans to displace Mr Ismail from his post upon his expected return to Pakistan later this month.

There is nothing reassuring about this tug of war, which bodes ill for economic stability. Much damage has already been done to the economy due to the PML-N's infighting over key policy decisions over the past two months. Tussles within the party created political instability, spooking capital markets and leading to considerable damage before budget negotiations with the IMF finally created some hope for stability and led to the restoration of a semblance of order.

The market now expects the finance minister to deliver on the IMF front. By most accounts, we are now on the last stretch of negotiations. Any major upheaval in the finance ministry — especially one that sees the main decision-maker changed — is likely to once again set the process back. Is that something we can afford?

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Phone tapping

IT is the season of audio leaks. No sooner does one ‘incriminating’ clip lose its shock value than another emerges on social media or a TV channel, from what appears to be a cornucopia of illicit recordings of phone conversations — usually serving the ends of whoever is in power. The latest snippet purportedly captures ousted prime minister Imran’s Khan’s wife, the reclusive and ‘non-political’ Bushra Bibi, instructing the PTI’s head of digital media Dr Arsalan Khalid to trend a ‘traitor’ hashtag on Twitter targeting people speaking against her husband, herself and her friend, Farah Shahzadi. Another recording obtained through phone tapping, say PTI leaders themselves, is about to surface — this one of a conversation between Mr Khan and his then principal secretary Azam Khan. On Monday at a press conference, former human rights minister Shireen Mazari called on the Supreme Court to take suo motu notice of the tapping of the former premier’s phone.

While Dr Khalid has been non-committal about the authenticity of the latest audio leak, PTI’s Shahbaz Gill has termed it a fabrication. That, however, is missing the wood for the trees. Phone tapping is illegal and has been declared so on several occasions. In 1997, the Supreme Court ruled the practice as violating the dignity of an individual and their constitutional right to privacy. Exceptions have been made: the Fair Trial Act 2012 allows security agencies to collect evidence by means of modern techniques, including wiretapping, but only for the purpose of tracking and prosecuting suspected terrorists. Nevertheless, it is an open secret that the country’s intelligence agencies tap the phones of many individuals — politicians, journalists and judges in particular — that fall outside that category. In June 2015, the ISI informed an apex court bench that it had tapped nearly 7,000 phones in the previous month, while IB said it had tapped close to 5,500 around the same time. Earlier this year, Maryam Nawaz, after the recording of a discussion between her and PML-N’s Pervez Rashid was leaked, demanded an apology and asked who had the right to tap her private conversation. Given that politicians across the board have been burned by this unlawful and untrammelled use of phone tapping, it seems worthwhile for all to desist from political point-scoring through leaked audios. It speaks to the the bankruptcy of our political discourse and the weakness of our accountability mechanisms that such tactics are used to discredit rivals.

Transgender job quota

IN a society where transgender persons often face violence and abuse, the Sindh Assembly's decision to reserve a 0.5pc quota for members of the community in the province's public-sector institutions is a welcome, progressive move. The Sindh legislature passed the relevant law in a unanimous decision during Monday's session, with the parliamentary affairs minister saying that the quota would also be implemented in the private sector. Earlier, several departments in Punjab had also announced quotas for the transgender community. Giving its members the ability to make a dignified living is essential to ensuring their basic rights, as the usual modes of employment available to this group is begging, or the flesh trade.

The announcement of the job quotas, as well as other moves at the state level, have marked a welcome official approach. For example, transgender people can now apply for CNICs; without the basic identity document, members of the community found it impossible to operate bank accounts, apply for decent jobs, etc. Moreover, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 is a landmark law that signalled that the state was ready to recognise and protect the community. The latter has indeed begun to emerge from the margins, with community members entering the police force, becoming doctors, lawyers and mediapersons. However, where considerable progress has been made in securing transgender rights, members of the community continue to be vulnerable targets. For example, numerous cases of murder have been reported, particularly of transgender persons in KP. Very often the killers get away with their crime as families — who usually disown trans members, especially in the more conservative parts of the country — are not interested in pursuing the case. This impunity must end and the murderers must be brought to justice. All other rights will only be of value when transgender people's right to life is protected by the state. Therefore, police forces need to be sensitised in order to protect the community, and take action against those who harm or murder its members.

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TTP talks' oversight

THE fact that elected representatives will have some oversight over peace talks with the banned TTP should help reduce the opacity surrounding the parleys.

While the security establishment had been leading the effort since last year, with the Afghan Taliban playing the role of facilitators, there had been growing demands, particularly from the PPP, for more civilian involvement in the process.

In this regard, a marathon session was held in Islamabad on Tuesday with the military's top brass briefing lawmakers and other civilian stakeholders about the peace process under the aegis of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security. Some positive outcomes of the huddle were the formation of a parliamentary oversight committee that would monitor the talks, while it was decided that erstwhile Fata's merger with KP, respect for the Constitution and disarming of the TTP were Pakistan's 'red lines'. There was a general consensus to continue the talks, though PTM leader and MNA Mohsin Dawar reportedly opposed the parleys.

While involving parliament is definitely a step forward, much still remains unknown and unanswered about any potential peace deal with the TTP.

For instance, will the militant group, known for savage violence and waging war on Pakistan, really change its bloodthirsty ways and accept the rule of law? Moreover, the TTP is an umbrella group of several militant factions. What guarantee is there that if the outfit's leadership agrees to the state's demands, splinter groups will not form and continue the violent 'struggle'? Also, the TTP is reportedly demanding 'compensation' for the 'damage' it has suffered. If anything, the militants must be made to pay for taking around 70,000 military and civilian lives through ruthless terrorist attacks in Pakistan. As for an amnesty demanded by the militants, perhaps this can be considered for low-level fighters; however, the masterminds responsible for the APS massacre and other crimes need to be brought to justice.

The parliamentary committee needs to consider these factors as it continues to monitor the peace process.

While the state, particularly the security establishment, seems to be keen to talk to the TTP, such desire for dialogue is missing when it comes to the PTM, which is a peaceful movement for civic and political rights.

The bottom line is that the state should not negotiate with terrorists from a position of weakness. The negotiators must also keep the fate of past, doomed peace agreements with the militants in mind. Put plainly, it is very difficult to trust the TTP.

One point reportedly raised during Tuesday's huddle is that the group could team up with IS-Khorasan to target Pakistan if talks fail. If this assessment is true, then there is all the more reason for the administration to be even more wary of the TTP for the militants just might use a peace deal as a ruse to strengthen their network, and create more havoc.

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Rain disaster

It is the same story year in and year out. Despite many lives lost, billions of rupees in accumulated damages and the displacement of people by natural calamities every year, the monsoon season still seems to catch the country off-guard. It appears that this year will be no different. Minister for Climate Change Sherry Rehman reported on Wednesday that 77 lives have already been lost in rain-related incidents thus far. The dead include a devastating number of children. Thirty-nine of the deaths occurred in Balochistan alone, where provincial authorities spent most of Tuesday fishing out bodies from ponds, streams, storm-water drains and other water bodies, or digging them up from under collapsed houses. Over the past 48 hours, rains also wreaked havoc in Balakot, where a mudslide swept away a woman and her two dozen or so cattle and landslides blocked major roads for hours, stranding tourists and locals. In Islamabad and Rawalpindi, two people were swept away by flash floods triggered by heavy rains. One of them drowned while attempting to save four children who had become stranded amidst the raging waters. The children, aged eight to 14 years, were thankfully saved by professional divers from the navy. There were reports of rains inundating low-lying areas and wreaking havoc on the city's drainage and sewerage system, forcing some people to leave their homes. More rainfall was expected over the coming day. Similarly, two were killed and many

injured in rain-related traffic accidents as heavy downpours lashed different areas of Sindh. A number of miners were reportedly trapped after rainwater entered their mines in Jhimpir. Rains also damaged railway tracks in the same area, suspending train services between Punjab and Karachi. Karachi was its usual miserable self after a spell of moderate rainfall, with sewerage overflowing and mixing with undrained rainwater on several key arteries, causing painful traffic jams.

Too many have died, and it is feared that the worst of the monsoon has yet to hit. However, it may still not be too late for the authorities to launch an emergency drive to educate the citizenry on how to remain safe in dangerous weather. Ms Rehman has declared the situation a 'national disaster' and urged provincial authorities to take her warnings seriously. Her words should be heeded and the relevant departments must mobilise to mitigate loss of life. Any continued complacency would be considered nothing short of criminal neglect.

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Sri Lanka bankruptcy

CRITICALLY low foreign exchange reserves; a plummeting currency and a tanking economy; lengthy power cuts and long, painful negotiations with the IMF for a bailout. These grim details of the existentialist crisis Sri Lanka is undergoing sound eerily familiar to Pakistan and many other developing states that are battling similar predicaments. To make matters worse, the Sri Lankan prime minister told parliament on Tuesday that the country was bankrupt and that the economic crisis would last till next year. For the people of the island nation, the pain is acute. Lines for fuel — whatever little is available — are serpentine while people have to wait in queues for days. There have also been riots near fuel stations, and troops have had to step in. Moreover, the UN says 80pc of the population is skipping meals due to food shortages and high prices, with inflation going through the roof.

How did Sri Lanka get here? There are no simple answers, but a combination of factors seems to be responsible for the island's catastrophic situation. Low tourist inflows due to the Covid-19 pandemic, failed harvests due to a fertiliser ban, one-family rule, corruption and a mountain of debt have all contributed to bringing the Sri Lankan state to its knees. However, the island cannot be left to its fate, and

the international community needs to show solidarity and help the people of Sri Lanka rebuild their country. The focus, especially for rich states and multilateral lenders, should be on providing enough funds to Colombo to allow routine life to function, rather than harbouring predatory concerns about how they will get their money back. The fact is that many states in the Global South face a crippling debt crisis, and there is an urgent need to reform, what the UN secretary general has described as the “morally bankrupt global financial system”. While domestic reform is important, developing states should be granted debt relief to help them face the intense headwinds that are currently battering the global economy.

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Battlefield Punjab

THE 20 by-polls due in Punjab on July 17 will be watched nationally, as their impact will be felt beyond the province.

The by-elections were necessitated after the ECP de-seated a number of rebel PTI provincial lawmakers for voting against the party line. The results of the by-polls, and subsequent re-election for the Punjab chief minister on July 22, will hopefully settle the administrative confusion that has affected governance in Pakistan’s most populous province.

Moreover, the electoral exercise will serve as a litmus test for PTI as well as PML-N, reflecting which way the political winds are blowing in Punjab.

Currently, Punjab CM Hamza Shehbaz, backed by the PPP and his assorted other allies, enjoys a razor-thin majority in the provincial legislature. Should the PTI claw back the majority of the 20 seats, Hamza Shehbaz’s short-lived tenure as provincial chief executive will surely be over, paving the way for Pervez Elahi — or whoever else the PTI nominates — to take the reins in Punjab.

On the other hand, if CM Hamza survives, his hands will be strengthened and he will be able to steer Punjab’s ship till the next elections.

Clarity is certainly needed in the province, as in the recent past we have witnessed the spectacle of two parallel Punjab Assembly sessions, one chaired by Speaker Elahi, and the other by Deputy Speaker Dost Mazari. This kind of

political wrangling takes away the administration's focus from more pressing matters, such as governance, law and order etc.

Beyond the chief minister's election, the by-polls will be a barometer of the political situation in Punjab after the departure of the PTI's government at the centre.

Former prime minister Imran Khan is currently on a whistle-stop tour of Punjab, breathing fire against the 'turncoats' who ditched him, and urging voters to return PTI candidates across Punjab. At this point, Mr Khan seems ahead of the PML-N and its rivals on the campaign trail. His electioneering has apparently unsettled his opponents, as the PPP offered its 'unconditional support' to the N-League's candidates in the by-polls.

Whether voters will choose to buy Imran Khan's rhetoric, or opt to believe the PML-N's promises will become clear on July 17.

However, considering the incredibly polarised political atmosphere, particularly in Punjab, the ECP and the provincial administration need to be on their toes to ensure that the electoral process is free from violence and intimidation. After all, the violence and mismanagement seen in Karachi's NA-240 by-poll, as well as the first phase of Sindh's LG elections, has left a lot to be desired.

Both the PTI and PML-N must also keep political temperatures in check and ensure that their workers and supporters remain peaceful on election day.

The road to Islamabad indeed runs through Lahore, and the results of Punjab's by-polls may well reflect national trends at least for the foreseeable future.

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Interest rate hike

THE State Bank does not seem willing to leave anything to chance. On Thursday, it jacked up the policy rate by an aggressive 125 basis points in response to the shocking inflation print for June and a trade deficit that rapidly went off the rails in the last two months of the recently concluded fiscal year. The rate hike followed an earlier 150bps jump announced in May, which though intended to moderate demand, seems not to have had the desired effect. The

benchmark rate now stands at 15pc — the highest it has been since November 2008. The acting State Bank Governor, Dr Murtaza Syed, made it clear at a press conference that the central bank is quite concerned about inflation, which made a 14-year high to touch 21.32pc in June. He warned that inflation would remain between 18pc to 20pc for the year, but the State Bank will try to ensure that it does not rise any further on a month-on-month basis even if the year-on-year numbers remain elevated. The governor said he expects the economy to grow between 3pc and 4pc this year, which he termed a healthy level which will keep inflation in check. He also urged the government to protect the poor through targeted subsidies, while asking the privileged to pick up the tab for a change.

The State Bank has chosen the aggressive route to bring inflation within range, but it remains to be seen whether it can achieve the soft landing that it is aiming for. The State Bank chief was quite frank in admitting that central bank chiefs all over the world are worried about current inflation trends and seem unsure of how to tackle the situation. Both local and international observers have recently expressed fears that economies might be pushed into a recession by central banks' zeal to control inflation through tighter interest rates. The Pakistani government must make necessary macroeconomic adjustments so that the pressure does not remain on the State Bank to control inflation through monetary tightening alone. For example, inflation has been considerably augmented by food prices, which were up 26pc year-on-year last month. As the State Bank governor pointed out, the central bank cannot rein in food inflation: it is up to the government to boost agricultural productivity and make sure any problems in the agri supply chain that can disrupt markets are resolved in a timely manner.

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Offal disposal

FOR Muslims, Eidul Azha is an occasion for sombre reflection on one's many privileges, marked by a ritual sacrifice in God's name. Unfortunately, as with so many other sacred observances, people here tend to get too caught up in the performative aspects and forget that their faith also has other important teachings, such as cleanliness, that need to be followed with consistency. While one cannot doubt the zeal and enthusiasm with which many Pakistanis participate in Eidul Azha rituals — planning and saving for weeks, sometimes

months — it is worth considering why very little of that preparation seems to go into the other important aspect of sacrifice: what to do with the remains of the animal once all religious obligations have been fulfilled.

Clearly, all of us have a role to play. Even without Eid, waste management is a task that our civic authorities tend to struggle with. On Eidul Azha, what capacities they do have tend to be quickly overwhelmed as they race to dispose of the heaps of offal generated as by millions of sacrifices. Citizens must play a responsible role in this regard by arranging for the remains of their sacrifices to be picked up by waste management teams. If local authorities have notified designated points where offal can be deposited for easy pick-up and transportation to a disposal zone, these should be used diligently. The more conscientious citizens should urge others around them, in neighbourhoods and among relatives, to follow suit. Improperly dumped animal waste is not only offensive to the senses, it is a significant biohazard, especially when the weather is as hot and humid as it is now across the country. People who reside around airports need to be especially careful, as dumping animal remains too close to a landing strip can create a significant safety hazard for aircraft, which face a heightened risk of bird strikes as flocks of scavenging birds converge on carrion. Both citizens and the authorities need to work together to keep things sanitary and safe as festivities get underway.

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Rage of the mob

FOR some time now, the depths of our rage, intolerance and ignorance have translated into mob violence, which has taken lives even of the innocent. Following a recent incident in which a young man was beaten to death and another severely injured by a crowd in Karachi's Qasba Colony, after the victims were accused of being robbers, police revealed that, in fact, no crime had been committed. Instead, a personal quarrel had turned deadly when the instigators of the violence claimed that the victims were robbers, attracting the attention of the area people. The sad reality is that during incidents such as these, the truth ceases to matter. A number of mob killings have followed a similar trend — where men are accused of a crime and lynched at the hands of a murderous crowd, only to be declared innocent later.

This dangerous trend should be a wake-up call for the authorities. Not only should both the perpetrators and instigators be given exemplary punishment, the government must also reflect on why these incidents are taking place so frequently, and what measures can prevent them. Though nothing can condone such behaviour, it is true that citizens are so fed up with the high levels of street crime that many fly into a rage at the mere mention of a robbery — without a second's thought as to whether the accusation is even true. On the other hand, the state's failure to curb crime and society's collective lack of trust in the government's abilities to effectively police the city have resulted in a situation where such macabre incidents are becoming commonplace. There have also been cases where police officials themselves have been complicit in horrific public lynchings. This must come to an end. It is the government's failure that citizens have such little faith in its competence that they do not wait for the law to take its course, and instead, take matters into their own hands. The authorities must act fast, before law and order breaks down completely.

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Indian 'dossier'

WHILE the Indian establishment may wish to portray the Kashmir issue as a domestic problem exploited by Pakistan, the truth is quite different. The Kashmiri movement for freedom is an indigenous struggle, backed morally by Pakistan. However, efforts continue by India to implicate Pakistan and discredit the Kashmiri struggle. The latest effort in this series is the release of a so-called dossier by the Indian defence ministry. As per reports in the Indian media, the document alleges that infiltrators from Pakistan are attempting to cross over into the disputed territory, while Pakistan is trying to “indoctrinate ... impressionable minds” in held Kashmir to participate in jihad. Interestingly, none other than the Indian army chief had admitted to the media in May that infiltration across the LoC had come down since 2019. Perhaps New Delhi needs to explain this glaring contradiction in the views expressed by its army chief, and the disclosures made in the ‘dossier’. The Foreign Office has dismissed the so-called dossier as “disinformation” designed to “divert the world's attention” from India's own brutal actions in the occupied region.

At one time, Kashmir-centric jihadi groups did have a relatively free hand operating in Pakistan and the possibility of some fighters slipping across the LoC to held Kashmir cannot be discounted as they consider both sides of the line to be their homeland. However, there is no reason to believe that the Pakistani state is sponsoring this activity. If India has solid evidence of cross-LoC militant movement, it should share it with Pakistan in good faith. Moreover, if political opposition and armed struggle against Indian rule continues in held Kashmir, it is not because Pakistan is operating these movements through remote control. It is very much a reflection of the local people's dissatisfaction with Indian rule. The problem is India, especially under the BJP's watch, continues to view the Kashmir issue through the lens of militancy and law and order, when at the heart of the issue lies the question of self-determination. Instead of engaging the genuine Kashmiri political leadership, India has chosen to clamp down hard, as symbolised by the reversal of the area's autonomy in August 2019. Cooking up claims of Pakistani meddling in Kashmir will not make the freedom struggle go away. The only sustainable solution to the Kashmir question that can bring long-term peace is for the three stakeholders — Pakistan, the Kashmiris and India — to agree to democratically decide the region's fate.

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A safe Eid

IT seems like we will be spending another Eid under the shadow of disease.

With the national Covid-19 positivity rate elevated, critical cases showing a steady rise and widespread worries that we may soon be enveloped by a sixth wave, health officials are becoming more vocal about the possibility of a major coronavirus outbreak during the Eidul Azha celebrations.

The wedding season, currently experiencing a lull due to Eid, is also expected to resume in earnest once the festivities are over, presenting new opportunities for the virus to spread.

Health authorities have been urging people to observe social distancing and take other precautions during social interactions, but the warnings seem to be falling on deaf ears.

In Karachi, where the positivity rate remains considerably elevated, public response to appeals to practise greater safety seems overwhelmingly dismissive. The enforcement of preventive SOPs remains weak, with citizens frequenting public spaces including train stations, bus terminals and shopping centres without wearing masks or caring for social distancing protocols.

In the midst of all this, another public health concern has reared its head. There is a heightened risk of an outbreak of the Congo virus, which is transmitted from the bite of ticks that attach themselves to sheep, goats, cows, buffaloes and other livestock.

A number of cases have already been reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and it is feared the disease could spread wider due to the movement of livestock to markets all over the country. People have been thronging the markets ahead of Eid to purchase animals, yet few seem aware of the danger they could be exposed to.

The government needs to shake off its sloth and be more proactive than it currently is.

Pakistan successfully countered previous waves of the coronavirus pandemic with smart lockdowns and strict enforcement of safety protocols. This time should be no different.

Yes, the newer variants of the coronavirus do not seem as deadly as older ones, and there are fewer hospitalisations and deaths, but we should not be tempting fate. Covid-19 remains a highly transmissible disease, and those people who suffer from comorbidities are at significant risk of experiencing a fatal infection. The risk of a new mutation is also ever-present, which means there is no room for complacency.

Likewise, people need to be educated better about the Congo virus so that they can take precautions to protect themselves and their families. Experts recommend wearing gloves while interacting with and sacrificing animals, and also while handling fresh meat to avoid being bitten.

As urged previously, robust plans also need to be in place to clean up and properly dispose of all animal remains on Eid days to prevent any other health risks from arising.

The confluence of so many disease risks should be taken seriously. The government must shrug off its lackadaisical attitude and work harder at preventing a national health crisis.

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CPEC resumption

IT appears that a recent counterterrorism breakthrough has greatly helped restore Chinese confidence in Pakistan's security apparatus and paved the way for the restoration of bilateral ties as well as CPEC-related activities, which had been on ice since late April.

Work has reportedly resumed on the Main Line 1 (ML-1) upgradation project, the largest component of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan and the centrepiece of the second phase of CPEC.

The importance of what this breakthrough represents cannot be overstated.

Beijing — an all-weather friend and one of our strongest allies — had all but pulled the plug on its development activities in Pakistan after a brazen terrorist attack on the grounds of Karachi University left three Chinese teachers dead. It was well known that Beijing had been quite upset for some time at the impunity with which its people were being attacked on Pakistani soil. After the KU attack, it simply suspended all work on the CPEC front till the time those responsible were nabbed and security for its personnel in Pakistan assured.

The gravity of the situation can be judged from the fact that recently army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa himself had to travel to Beijing with guarantees in a bid to win the Chinese over.

It is unclear what the army chief offered to the Chinese authorities, and what terms were set for the future.

The recent busting of a terrorist cell linked to Baloch extremists BLA and BLF, however, has thawed the ice considerably. The operation reportedly came in coordination with a group of Chinese investigators who had arrived here and were working with the Pakistani team tasked with the case.

This unusual arrangement reflects a lack of faith on the Chinese side. It would have been much better had there been more clarity about the role of this team and whether we should expect similar arrangements in the future, as has been rumoured in some quarters.

Be that as it may, it appears that Chinese authorities are for now satisfied with the progress made and wish to resume their work. It is now up to our government and security forces to make sure there is no further incident which may imperil goodwill between the two countries again. However, there also needs to be greater transparency in our dealings with Beijing so that there is greater visibility of the progress being made under CPEC and how the project may affect the security of both foreigners working in Pakistan and the Pakistanis living here.

It is irregular for so much to continue to be negotiated behind closed doors while such a major, transformational project is being executed on our soil. Bilateral relations between Pakistan and China are not the exclusive domain of just one branch of the state that terms continue to be negotiated by it at the exclusion of all others.

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Haj message

AFTER two years of limited numbers of pilgrims able to attend due to the Covid-19 pandemic, around a million people — including from abroad — gathered in the plains of Arafat to mark the central rite of this year's Haj on Friday. In 2020 and 2021, only a few thousand had attended, that too limited to Saudis and foreigners residing in the kingdom. Braving searing desert temperatures, pilgrims from across the world gathered in Hijaz reflecting the diversity of the Muslim world. What was also significant was that this year women were allowed to attend the pilgrimage in groups, without the presence of a mahram. While many schools of thought had always allowed women to make the sacred journey on their own, the Saudi government's decision to drop the mahram requirement last year — as part of the crown prince's 'modernisation' drive — has allowed all Muslim women to perform Haj without a male guardian. Another key aspect of Haj is the sermon at Arafat. This year, the khutba was delivered by Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul Karim al-Issa, head of the Muslim World League. Along with religious issues, the sheikh touched upon the need to shun division and for

“love and compassion” to “prevail in our dealings”. The Saudi scholar also urged Muslims to treat those of other faiths well, observing that the spirit of Islam “includes goodness to all humanity”.

As Muslim communities are riven by internal dissent and division, these words need to be translated into practice. Sectarianism has done untold damage to the Muslim world, particularly seen in Iraq, Yemen and Syria. We in Pakistan have also witnessed the ogre of sectarian bigotry tear through the fabric of society, particularly over the last four decades. Therefore, religious authorities must lead the way and urge their flocks to shun sectarian narratives, and respect all schools of thought. Moreover, the message to treat non-Muslims better should also be heeded, as in most Muslim-majority states the condition of minorities is far from ideal. The fundamental rights of minority citizens need to be protected, and they must be free to practise their faiths. Also, Muslims in Yemen, Palestine and held Kashmir, as well as the Rohingya, continue to face oppression and misery. Instead of simply voicing their concern, the global Muslim community needs to make a sustained effort to project the condition of these oppressed populations and bring peace to their tortured lands.

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Boris Johnson’s exit

AFTER three eventful and tumultuous years at 10 Downing Street, Boris Johnson is getting ready to pack his bags and leave the prime ministerial residence. This is largely thanks to a rebellion within his cabinet, as ministers and senior members of the British prime minister’s Conservative Party expressed their lack of confidence in his leadership. In particular, several ethics-related controversies severely dented the maverick politician’s reputation.

These include accusations of inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by a Tory former deputy chief whip, and reports of boozy parties hosted at Number 10 while the rest of the UK was in strict lockdown during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mr Johnson’s legacy is likely to be mixed, as he failed to appropriately address the scandals that plagued his administration, while he also championed Brexit, his country’s messy divorce with the EU.

The supposed advantages of Brexit have yet to reach the British people, as the country's economy tanks. While some, including former PM John Major, have called for Boris Johnson's immediate exit from Number 10, he is likely to cling on for a few more months, until the Tories elect a new leader, and by default the new PM.

The race for the UK's top job is on, with a number of candidates of colour reportedly vying to occupy Number 10. These include Sajid Javid, of Pakistani origin, as well as Rishi Sunak, with roots in India. Both men are said to be top contenders. Compare this apparent reflection of diversity within the Conservative Party with the 'Rivers of Blood' speech Tory MP Enoch Powell delivered in 1968, in which he railed against mass immigration and said that the day was near when non-white people would "dominate" the UK.

The Conservative Party certainly seems to have come a long way from those dark days. However, whoever enters Number 10 will have their work cut out for them, as the UK sees its highest recession in four decades, and more economic turbulence is forecast for the days ahead.

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Monsoon misery

THIS year's monsoon rains have taken a heavy human toll across the country due to flash floods and urban flooding. Around 150 people have been killed in rain-related incidents over the last month, with Balochistan hit particularly hard. Over 60 rain-related fatalities have been reported since June in the province.

Sindh has not fared much better, with the Provincial Disaster Management Authority saying at least 26 people have been killed in rain-related incidents across the province, with most fatalities reported from Karachi.

Unfortunately, flooded roads and homes, the fear of electrocution and life coming to a standstill are the usual outcomes of even moderate rainfall in Pakistan's largest city. This year's monsoon, with consistent rainfall recorded in the city over the last week or so, has lived up to the pattern.

Precipitation over the weekend into Monday resulted in flooded thoroughfares, with the city's Keamari and East districts receiving the most rainfall, and areas

from Clifton and Defence in the south of Karachi up till its northern fringes all facing urban flooding.

Various reasons are being cited for Karachi's annual monsoon disaster. These include climate change and heavier-than-usual rains; official incompetence; encroachments and lack of planning. Perhaps it would not be wrong to say that a combination of factors is responsible for the havoc.

The heavy rainfall in 2020 had prompted all arms of the state to look into solving this key problem in the country's commercial heart. The then prime minister announced a Rs1.1tr package to 'transform' the city; the Supreme Court ordered encroachments around drainage channels to be removed, while the provincial government also swung into action.

Two years down the line, not much has changed, and clearly, the civilian administration and those managing DHA and the cantonment areas have learnt few lessons from past disasters. While it is true that Karachi has suffered from decades of official neglect at the federal, provincial and local levels, there needs to be a concerted effort from official quarters to resolve the urban flooding issue permanently.

There is an argument that even better developed cities struggle with urban flooding. While that may be correct, it cannot be an excuse to abandon Karachi, and allow the grim annual ritual of rain-related death, dislocation and destruction to be repeated ad infinitum.

Urban planners and topography experts — local or foreign if need be — should be consulted by the state to chart out a plan to minimise the risks of flooding, and their recommendations need to be implemented in earnest.

The Met department has forecast more heavy rain in the days ahead. The administration needs to have contingency plans ready to better tackle the coming wet weather, while without an improved drainage and urban disaster response mechanism in the long term, the people of Karachi will be left to face the gushing floodwaters on their own.

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Cadaveric transplants

LIVING in a country where each year end-stage organ failure kills over 150,000 people, we need to be less squeamish about cadaveric organ donation and come to see the practice for what it is — a beautiful act of altruism. After all, the vast majority of the 40,000 deaths from kidney failure, 70,000 from liver failure and 15,000 from heart failure occur because of the unavailability of compatible organs. The government has so far done little beyond giving token official statements now and then in support of deceased organ donation. It is high time it sets about actively promoting the practice through practical and innovative measures that assuage public concerns and appeal to their sense of compassion. The Punjab Human Organ Transplantation Authority's decision to 'expand the scope' of cadaveric transplants in the province is therefore a welcome one, particularly as Punjab has long been the hub of organ trafficking in the country. In this connection, PHOTA has asked three leading medical institutions to issue guidelines to encourage cadaveric donations, create awareness among the public to pledge their organs and persuade clerics to issue edicts in support of the practice.

It should be pointed out that prominent ulema in Pakistan — and in other Muslim countries — have already endorsed the practice as being in harmony with religious precepts. Nevertheless, to seek the clergy's consistent engagement is worthwhile as many of the misgivings that exist in the public's mind on the issue are rooted in religious belief. The government should also aim to make cadaveric transplant donation more high-profile, and thus more acceptable, by inviting celebrities from the world of entertainment and sports to register themselves as donors. It is a shame that despite more than a decade since an ethical transplantation law was enacted in Pakistan, there have only been a handful of deceased organ transplants in the country. One of the reasons is that very few people have pledged their organs. But getting people to become potential donors is only the first step. What needs to be created is a culture supportive of the harvesting of organs from a brain-dead individual who in their lifetime had decided to donate their organs, but very often the families of such potential donors refuse to allow the procedure to go ahead. Protocols for harvesting organs must be transparent and properly communicated to the public so that misunderstandings are removed. No less than a national discourse on the subject is called for.

Descent into chaos

THE political and economic chaos unravelling in Sri Lanka is a chilling reminder of what bad governance and apathy can do to a country if the interests of the elite and the citizenry remain at odds with each other. At the time of writing, the island nation's president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was making a desperate bid to flee the country. As president, Mr Rajapaksa enjoys immunity from arrest; but he has recently promised to resign, reportedly by today (July 13), which means he could be taken into custody and prosecuted for the many wrongs he is accused of by his compatriots if he is on Sri Lankan soil when he steps down as head of state. He has been on the run since violent protests culminated in his official residence that was stormed by angry Sri Lankans sick of prolonged power blackouts, shortages of basic goods and runaway inflation. The once all-powerful leader and his brother, the former finance minister Basil Rajapaksa, have since been blocked in their attempts to leave Sri Lanka quietly by immigration officials refusing to cooperate. To be fair, the Rajapaksa brothers alone are not responsible for the years of economic mismanagement by successive governments. However, they did make a bad situation much worse by mishandling the devastation wreaked on Sri Lanka's tourism-reliant economy by Covid-19. Matters slowly come to a head, and Sri Lankans are now overwhelmingly refusing to pay the painful cost of their leaders' persistent inability to deliver.

There are lessons aplenty in Sri Lanka's predicament for Pakistan and our local political dynasties. While we do not seem to be in danger of an impending economic collapse, the risks to the country's well-being have not subsided and the economic hurt felt by the people these past few months has now started to sting. Those in power must fear the anger of the masses. The government must restructure and reform the economy to create a more equitable society if we are to avoid social collapse in the future.

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The people bomb

WE are fighting a losing battle, slipping inexorably towards a dystopian future where want and deprivation will be our lot. The reason? There are simply too many of us: the pace at which Pakistan's population is growing is fast outstripping our ability to provide for the millions that call this country home. Unbelievably, there still appears to be no well-thought-out and cohesive population control programme in the offing. World Population Day, that was observed on July 11 as it is every year, is meant to highlight the importance of population issues in a world with shrinking resources. Pakistan's alarming population growth rate of 2.4pc per annum, which translates to between 4m and 5m children being added to the total each year, is no less than an existential threat. The government must snap out of its ostrich-like attitude and use all the means at its disposal to address the issue.

The spiralling population also poses grave risks to internal security. At 230m people, Pakistan is the fifth most populous nation in the world and on track to balloon to around 300m by 2030. The National Security Policy announced at the beginning of 2022 rightly recognised human security as a precondition for internal security. It also alluded to the elephant in the room and made some mention of 'population management'. But nothing more has emerged on that score. The government needs to involve the media in creatively furthering the narrative about the benefits of limiting family size. That must be backed up with access to dependable family planning services through the public healthcare system. Incorporating these in the Sehat Sahulat card and in the Ehsaas/BISP programmes would accord the issue the importance it deserves. A recent major study jointly undertaken by several international organisations including WHO found that women in Pakistan have an estimated 3.8m unintended pregnancies each year, most resulting from unmet need for modern contraception. The data also showed that 52pc of married women of reproductive age who want to avoid pregnancy are not using a modern contraceptive method.

We are now faced with a perfect storm. Inadequate investment in education and poor economic growth have generated enormous resentment and anger among a youth cohort that sees few prospects for advancement amid contracting employment opportunities. The effects of climate change are bearing down unmistakably upon us, and making scarce resources even more so.

Unpredictable weather patterns and rising temperatures are adversely affecting harvests and exacerbating food insecurity. Population pressures also leave us much more vulnerable to international developments such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war that disrupt global supply chains. Shortages of water and electricity have already begun to spark unrest; the smallest provocation, it seems, is enough to trigger mob violence in a people whose patience has been stretched thin by poor governance, rising inflation and urban crime. This is not how a country's future is secured.

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Election discontent

IT is getting difficult to keep track of what the PTI wants us to believe about the July 17 by-elections in Punjab. Going by party leaders' recent speeches, the polls have either been completely rigged, or they will prove to be an overwhelming vindication of Imran Khan's politics. Recent statements from former prime minister Imran Khan and former information minister Fawad Chaudhry suggest that the party is confused about which narrative direction to take. On the one hand, the former premier has repeatedly alleged that a certain 'Mr X' and his accomplice, 'Mr Y', have been pulling strings to fix the election in favour of the PML-N. It is understood that these individuals belong to security institutions, which have otherwise insisted that they remain 'neutral'. Mr Khan has also told his supporters that the PML-N enjoys the support of the chief election commissioner and that his rival party cannot win the upcoming by-elections without massive rigging. On the other hand, Mr Chaudhry seems quite confident of the PTI's prospects despite his party head's fears, asserting somewhat contradictorily that the PTI will secure the majority of the seats being contested this Sunday and that the PML-N cannot win even if Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif himself rigs the election.

It appears that the PTI is playing both victim and victor to hedge against any outcome that may go against its wishes. As long as this is just a face-saving tactic, the PTI may perhaps be excused for playing politics. However, if its intentions are more sinister and its leaders are laying the grounds for more agitation and upheaval in the weeks ahead, they should reconsider the party's stance. Clearly, the party itself believes there is a chance the elections are going

to be conducted fairly. Why else would Mr Khan be describing the July 17 by-polls as the “first test” for the so-called ‘neutrals’ to prove that they are, in fact, non-partisan? Until they can prove any irregularity, PTI leaders should desist from bringing the election into disrepute. At the same time, the Election Commission must ensure that the electoral contest remains free of controversy. Pakistan cannot afford even more public discontent and loss of faith in institutions of the state when economic uncertainty is casting such a heavy shadow on its future. It is better for the country that the fight between the PTI and the PML-N remain unimpeachable.

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Modern-day slavery

EMPLOYING children as domestic help is a common practice throughout the country, and it is only when acts of barbaric violence against minors are reported that society takes notice of their miserable plight. However, the public outrage is for a limited period only, and soon enough, these forsaken children are forgotten, and left to fend for themselves against brutish employers.

The latest incident involving violence against child domestic workers has been reported from Lahore, where Kamran, a 10-year-old boy, was allegedly tortured to death by his employers, while his six-year-old brother Rizwan managed to survive a savage beating. According to media reports, the boys were tortured for taking food from the fridge without permission. This ‘transgression’ reportedly resulted in hours-long beatings, while police say they found deep bruises caused by sharp-edged weapons on the body of the murdered boy.

This may be a case of extreme violence, but the sad fact is that many children across Pakistan have to put up with beatings and abuse of a similar nature on a daily basis. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that many employers treat their domestic staff, particularly minors, as modern-day slaves. Hence, it is not an employer-employee relationship, but that of a master and slave.

Poor parents are often forced by circumstances to send their children off to work in the homes of the rich for a few thousand rupees, and a few scraps of food for the youngsters.

Despite various laws addressing child labour and child domestic work, implementation is practically non-existent.

The fact is that those who murder and torture children must be punished under the fullest extent of the law. Moreover, there needs to be stricter enforcement of child labour laws, and only adults should be engaged by employers as domestic help. Provincial child welfare bureaus need to be more vigilant of these exploitative practices, while the state, civil society, community leaders and ulema must work together to create consensus in society against the menace of child domestic labour.

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Bolton's disclosure

THE fact that the US has been involved in regime change for decades is perhaps the worst kept secret in the realm of international relations. However, for a high-ranking member of the American establishment to admit this is significant, as Donald Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton has recently done. While talking to CNN, Mr Bolton — a known Washington hawk who has served Republican presidents from Ronald Reagan to Mr Trump — admitted that he was “somebody who has helped plan” coups d'état and that “it takes a lot of work”. When pressed further by the interviewer, he mentioned the 2019 botched attempt to get rid of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as an example of his regime change experience.

American efforts to make and break foreign governments go back to the 19th century, but it was perhaps after the retreat of European empires in the mid-20th century that the US began to really project its power overseas in a neocolonial fashion. From overthrowing socialist governments in Latin America to engineering regime change in the energy-rich Middle Eastern states, Washington has wielded a big stick and used it far too often. Sometimes efforts have been overt, involving military invasions to overthrow unwanted governments, while in other instances covert methods have been employed, using intelligence assets to foment social and political unrest in foreign states. Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria are all recent examples of the American use of force to change or confront regimes seen as hostile to Washington. Closer to home, there is a considerable body of evidence that the US has involved itself in Pakistan's internal affairs over

the decades, using both carrot and stick. Washington was certainly happy to see Zulfikar Ali Bhutto go, and found a fellow cold warrior in the shape of Ziaul Haq to confront Moscow's 'evil empire' in Afghanistan. And while officially the US has supported democracy, Washington policymakers were relieved to find a 'liberal' general like Pervez Musharraf running the show as the US sought to fight 'terror' across the globe. In more recent days, Imran Khan has accused the US of engineering his exit. However, while Washington apparently did not enjoy cordial relations with the PTI government, 'Cablegate' has been blown out of proportion, and evidence of an American coup to remove Mr Khan remains inconclusive.

Has the US learnt any lessons from its history of gunboat diplomacy and meddling in other states' affairs? Apparently not. If anything, others may have been emboldened by America's disregard for the sovereignty of foreign states. For example, Vladimir Putin, before launching his ill-advised invasion of Ukraine, may have studied the American playbook on how to engineer regime change. The fact is that 'responsibility to protect' and implanting democracy are fig leaves the US has used to project its power overseas, in the process destabilising states, and bringing ruin and misery to independent peoples.

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Setting boundaries

THE Islamabad High Court's detailed judgement on military encroachments on Margalla Hills National Park is a warning for the various parties involved to reassess their involvement in 'extracurricular' activities that often cause harm to their professional responsibilities.

By any consideration, the armed forces should never have gotten involved in activities that are a distraction from their core responsibility: protecting the nation's frontiers and its people from malevolent forces. It is worth asking what led them to become so invested in commercial activities like the operation of golf courses or restaurants in the process of defending the country.

The judgement, that follows the court's short order in January, has opened the door for this conversation: "The Pakistan Army has no power nor jurisdiction to, directly or indirectly, engage in business ventures of any nature outside its composition nor to claim the ownership of state land," it reads.

At last, we can talk about the elephant that has for long been squeezing everyone else in the room.

The judgement certainly does not pull any punches. “The urge of state institutions to act as a state within the state is obvious,” it notes in one place.

It is important that the court’s rebuke be taken in its intended spirit: when the most powerful institutions of the country start acting in defiance or contravention of the law — the same law they are sworn to uphold and which underpins the state they pledge to give blood and sweat to protect — it sends the signal that the state is weak and can be overruled if one has enough power. This paves the path to disorder and anarchy, which is the antithesis of the responsibility assigned to all organs of the state tasked with protecting it. The judgement makes particular note of this, and it is unfortunate that matters have come to the point where the armed forces need to be reprimanded for their transgressions by the courts.

It would be doubly unfortunate, however, if the matter is not taken seriously and is once again swept under the carpet once the public’s attention is sufficiently diverted.

The unfortunate reality is that state institutions’ blatant disregard for laws has emboldened many non-state elements to make very similar attempts to grab state resources by using some very wrong precedents set by the former. It is time we drew the line somewhere. The blatant grab for resources and assets that belong first to the people has to stop.

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Antimicrobial resistance

THE World Health Organisation’s call for accelerating the development of vaccines to prevent infections caused by antimicrobial resistance shows that the ‘superbug’ apocalypse that health experts had been worrying about for years is now well and truly upon us. Describing the growing resistance of bacteria, viruses and other microbes to the existing stream of antibiotics as a silent pandemic, the WHO earlier this week released a report about the vaccines that have been tried or are being clinically tested for this purpose. Vaccines prevent infections and reduce their intensity, and the state here has in place programmes

such as the EPI, and more lately, anti-Covid vaccinations. According to the WHO, vaccines can also be used to reduce the incidence of AMR. Since infections caused by superbugs are difficult, and sometimes impossible, to treat, vaccines can act as a defence against AMR.

Several examples of AMR can be found in Pakistan, where the issue is of particular concern to health experts since certain diseases prevalent in the country, such as tuberculosis and typhoid, have become resistant to the drugs traditionally used to counter them. In 2018, there was an outbreak of extensively drug-resistant typhoid in children in Sindh. The following year, in 2019, the provincial government carried out a vaccination drive under which schoolchildren were administered the typhoid conjugate vaccine. This helped control the spread of the illness. Pakistan also has the dubious distinction of accounting for more than 60pc of drug-resistant TB cases in the Eastern Mediterranean region. This phenomenon has been 'helped along' by the over-prescription of antibiotics by ill-informed doctors and quacks. Across the world, drug-resistant bacterial infections cause almost 5m deaths each year; more than 1m are directly linked to AMR. In our own context, there is a need to closely monitor doctors' prescriptions and the sale of antibiotics by pharmacies. What is equally important, though, is disease prevention. Governments must ensure decent and clean living and working spaces so that these spots don't end up becoming breeding grounds for deadly superbugs.

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Polio cluster

THE continued emergence of polio cases from North Waziristan district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa indicates that the vaccine refusal phenomenon extends to more than just a handful of families. The 12th case of wild poliovirus surfaced earlier this week after a 21-month-old boy experienced loss of movement in his right leg. This latest case is the ninth one to emerge from the Mir Ali union council in North Waziristan district. But news reports quoting health officials have revealed that other places in KP also remain at risk. They include South Waziristan, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Tank and Lakki Marwat. Though no case has emerged from these areas in recent months, according to reports, environmental samples have indicated the presence of the poliovirus there.

The aggressive resurgence of polio in this area was surprising as zero cases had been reported in the previous 15 months. Such a high number of cases in a short span of time — the first polio case was reported in April from Mir Ali — should be viewed as a call for urgent action. Subsequent reports about the two initial polio patients in Mir Ali had revealed that both were cases of silent refusals. The affected children had, thus, remained unvaccinated and susceptible to the virus. In fact, both had fake markers on their fingers. Indelible blue ink is used by vaccinators to distinguish vaccinated children from the rest during door-to-door campaigns. The fingers of these children had been marked by their parents to evade the vaccine dose. Subsequent reports revealed that this phenomenon was also common elsewhere. Now that the emergence of new cases has shed light on the persistent issues in the management of vaccination campaigns, increased scrutiny by polio officials and other health workers is necessary so that the various deficiencies in the programme can be addressed and long-standing problems that are often pointed out by international health bodies are removed. It may be wise to shift the focus of anti-polio efforts from mass vaccination to targeted interventions in high-risk areas.

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Fuel price cut

THE government must be quite grateful for the opportunity to announce some measure of relief for the economically distressed citizenry ahead of the weekend by-polls in Punjab. After Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz's electricity subsidy was shot down by the Election Commission a week earlier as an attempt to influence the upcoming by-elections, a 'just-in-time' reduction in fuel prices by the federal government is what the ruling coalition needed to win some favour with the public as 20 Punjab constituencies head to polls on Sunday. The reduction in prices is not insubstantial — petrol prices have been cut by Rs18.50 per litre, while diesel prices have been slashed by Rs40.54 per litre. Prices of other petroleum products have also been reduced considerably. However, considering that petrol and diesel prices alone had risen by Rs99 and Rs132.39 per litre respectively over the past two months, it will be interesting to see just how well the general public takes this recent reduction.

The price cut has followed on the heels of the announcement that Pakistan has at long last reached a staff-level agreement with the IMF that will allow for the resumption of the loan programme and the release of \$1.18bn. The deal was a hard-fought success for the incumbent government, which was forced to make a series of tough concessions to convince the IMF it was serious about fixing imbalances in the economy. For example, the government has agreed to nearly double its primary budget surplus target for the ongoing fiscal year. For that, it will need as much revenue as it can secure while also cutting expenses wherever possible. The government has committed to the IMF that it will gradually increase the petroleum levy to Rs50 per litre from the present Rs10 on petrol and Rs5 on diesel. It is also worth noting that no sales tax is being charged at the moment on petroleum products. In such a scenario, it is worth asking if it would not have been more prudent to retain the favourable differential in fuel prices as much-needed revenue, especially because tax avenues are expected to shrink as the global slowdown in economic activity starts throttling the Pakistani economy. It is understandable why the government wanted to immediately pass on the benefit of lower oil prices, but it must realise it is walking a tightrope when it comes to managing its kitty amidst an economic slowdown.

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SC on Suri's ruling

THE Supreme Court's detailed judgement explaining why it set aside then National Assembly Speaker Qasim Suri's April 3 ruling to block a no-confidence motion against Imran Khan has expectedly elicited polarised opinions from the treasury and opposition. While the PTI feels wronged, with former PM Khan saying he is "deeply hurt", the ruling PML-N wants to invoke Article 6 against those involved in the April 3 events.

One of the judges on the bench in his additional note had pondered whether the article dealing with high treason could be applied in this case. Moreover, the PTI is also conflating the detailed judgement with its conspiracy narrative, as former minister Fawad Chaudhry has termed the decision 'political', and questioned the timing of its release just before the Punjab by-elections.

With regard to the alleged US conspiracy to topple the PTI administration, the National Security Committee had already said there was no evidence of such a

foreign plot, and the apex court had pretty much validated the same. Even if Washington did not approve of the PTI government, Mr Khan's removal as prime minister was largely a result of domestic factors as key actors within the establishment were apparently not happy with the PTI administration.

Also, the party's selective acceptance of court decisions is perplexing. While it has cried foul over the Supreme Court's ruling in the Suri matter, it was all praise for the court when it decided that the votes of rebel lawmakers should not be counted in its interpretation of Article 63-A. The decision had been hailed even though dissenting opinions from two members of the bench have led to concerns of judicial overreach in the majority's interpretation of Article 63-A. As for the PTI's insinuations that key state actors are conspiring against it, unless it has irrefutable evidence that efforts are afoot to engineer a defeat for the party at the ballot box, it should stop promoting conspiracy theories.

Meanwhile, the application of Article 6 to the actions of April 3 is a highly debatable proposition. After all, the Constitution has been mutilated and held in abeyance by military rulers in the past, and no one has been held accountable. Therefore, calls to invoke the treason clause for violating the country's basic law hold no water.

But at the heart of the matter is the role that unelected institutions have played in making and breaking governments in Pakistan. The country has a long history of military intervention, while the judiciary has previously aided extra-constitutional steps under the doctrine of necessity. The only way to stop such interference and strengthen the democratic process is for parliament to be supreme. If the elected representatives themselves decide that 'neutrals' and 'umpires' are not needed to 'guide' the political process, constitutional and political crises in future can hopefully be averted.

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SAS killings

WESTERN states have often justified their invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as necessary operations to fight terrorism, protect democracy, neutralise weapons of mass destruction, etc. However, the overwhelming body of evidence — as well as world opinion — suggests that these were barefaced occupations which

helped further destabilise these states. What is more, while the US, European states and other members of the Western community claim to abide by a superior set of moral values, their troops have often engaged in horrific war crimes in these theatres, with Western governments left to explain the atrocities, or look the other way. A recent BBC investigation into alleged war crimes committed by the elite SAS unit of the British military has uncovered disturbing details of how the UK's troops shot unarmed individuals in Afghanistan as they claimed to battle the Afghan Taliban, while in many instances weapons were planted at the crime scene to make the extrajudicial killings look like a firefight between troops and militants. It is equally disturbing that British officers, including a senior general, failed to report the killings of detainees and unarmed men when these were brought to their knowledge.

Perhaps reports like these explain why instead of 'winning hearts and minds', the occupying powers earned only animosity from most Afghans and Iraqis. The US military is also notorious for its mistreatment and abuse of detainees, as grim tales from Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib in Iraq have testified. In the case of the SAS killings, a deeper probe is in order to uncover the true scope of abuse. However, this may be blocked by powerful quarters, as the UK's defence ministry has dismissed the BBC investigation as "subjective reporting". Yet such disclosures only add to the argument that Western states need to stop undertaking neocolonial 'civilising missions'. While Western states deride militants for their human rights abuses, their own lawless tactics are not much better. Moreover, the families of the murdered individuals should be compensated so that they can get some sort of closure.

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Crucial by-elections

THAT much is at stake for the PML-N and PTI in today's by-polls on 20 provincial seats in Punjab is an understatement. Indeed, the outcome of the by-polls will determine the future of the fledgling Hamza Shehbaz government in the run-off election for the office of chief minister on July 22 as ordered by the Supreme Court, and, by extension, the fate of the coalition government led by the PML-N at the centre.

More importantly, the results will shape national politics for years to come. Hence, neither party can afford to lose seats in the Punjab Assembly. No wonder we have seen the top leadership of the two parties campaign hard in the past couple of weeks in their bid to ensure victory for their respective candidates. Sadly, they have often resorted to venomous rhetoric against each that runs the risk of creating further divisions and inciting violence.

Explainer: Why the by-polls in Punjab are so important

For example, former prime minister Imran Khan has consistently accused the ECP and its chief of bias and of rigging voters' lists. He has also alleged that the civil bureaucracy and police are blatantly supporting PML-N candidates. Besides, he has stated that certain (un-named) military officers and intelligence agencies are conspiring to manipulate the by-poll results in favour of the ruling party.

He has also been urging his followers to hold the PTI 'turncoats' accountable for being disloyal to the party, often infusing his speeches with dangerous religious rhetoric and painting the democratic contest as a 'fight between good and evil' to whip up emotions. PML-N ministers have had no qualms about sinking to the same level by threatening to lodge treason cases against PTI leaders. They have also warned of stern action against those who disrupt law and order. Thus, it is not surprising that the acrimonious atmosphere in which these crucial by-elections are taking place has spawned widespread fears of violence during polling.

Even though the ECP has made arrangements to monitor and prevent violations of election laws and the code of conduct, it can only do so much. District administration and police can intervene only after the fact. Calls for de-escalating the toxic political rhetoric seem to have fallen on deaf ears. With the PTI believing this is a do-or-die situation, its leadership has made it amply clear that it will not accept any outcome — even if the polling is held in a free and fair manner — that is short of a victory for its candidates.

It would be highly irresponsible on the part of its leadership and unfortunate for the country if the party failed to ensure that its supporters remain peaceful today, whatever the results may be. Meanwhile, the ruling PML-N must ensure that the vote is held in a peaceful atmosphere, and that its workers do not respond to provocations from their rivals and provide them with an excuse to challenge the results.

Ethnic tensions

ONCE more, the spectre of ethnic violence has returned to haunt Sindh. The disturbances were sparked by the recent death of Bilal Kaka, who was killed during a brawl at a Hyderabad eatery. The man's murder has been given an ethnic colour, with rioting spreading to several Sindh cities, including Karachi. In fact, the city's Sohrab Goth area saw two successive days of violence on Thursday and Friday, including arson and looting, as protesters blocked the key M9 Motorway linking the metropolis to the rest of the country. Hundreds of commuters, including families, were trapped in a highly volatile situation. At least two people were reportedly killed during the Karachi disturbances. Perhaps the only silver lining to this madness is the fact that elements from both mainstream and nationalist parties, together with state functionaries, have appealed for peace, though incendiary material on social media has done much to fan the flames.

The first priority of the state in such a delicate situation must be to keep the peace. Those responsible for the murder of Bilal Kaka must face the law, while the elements involved in bloodshed and rioting during protests should also be punished. Peaceful protest is a democratic right of the people, but violence and threats to the lives and property of citizens cannot be tolerated. The administration, therefore, has to continue efforts to de-escalate the situation while political parties and nationalist groups, as well as leaders of the Pakhtun and Sindhi communities, have no option but to keep up their endeavours to prevent malevolent forces from fanning ethnic hatred. The state has a key responsibility to monitor social media in this regard. While the mainstream media is largely careful when reporting matters of such sensitivity, the internet is a minefield of rumours, half-truths and lies all dressed up as 'alternative facts'; these can play a devastating role in worsening delicate situations. Any content that calls for violence, or promotes ethnic, racial or sectarian hatred must be taken down immediately. The second leg of Sindh's LG polls is only a week away, and, it is even more urgent to ensure that harmony is restored in the province to ensure peaceful polling. Sindh is a land that has given shelter to all regardless of caste, colour and ethnicity. However, efforts to create ethnic strife in the past have done much harm to the province, which is why current moves to revive the ghosts of communal enmity must be thwarted.

Justice delayed

DESPITE earnest efforts by their lordships to bring down the number of cases pending decision across all tiers of the justice system in Pakistan, the backlog remains considerable. As reported in this paper, over 2m cases are pending decision across the country. It is not that cases are not being heard and decided; the problem appears to be the large number of new cases filed that result in a ballooning backlog. While over 12,800 cases were decided by the Supreme Court last year, over 18,000 new cases were filed before the apex court. And while the provincial and Islamabad high courts also have to deal with a significant caseload, it is at the level of the lower judiciary where the backlog is greatest, particularly in Punjab. While 2.9m cases were decided in Pakistan's largest province, 2.8m fresh litigations were filed.

Several attempts have been made to address this persistent problem affecting the quality of justice delivered to litigants. These include the National Judicial Policy of 2009, which emphasised the need to reduce the pendency of cases before the nation's courts. However, these efforts don't seem to have had the desired effect on reducing the caseload. Legal experts have cited the need to increase the number of judges to hear cases. There is also a need to improve infrastructure, such as building more courtrooms that can accommodate a higher number of judges. Other attempts to streamline the justice system have included setting up 'model courts', while anti-terrorism courts established 25 years ago were supposed to decide cases in seven days; in fact, many high-profile terrorism cases have lasted for years. Perhaps along with increasing the number of judicial staffers, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as arbitration and mediation, can also be employed, especially when dealing with civil cases at the lower judiciary's level. Moreover, the trend of filing frivolous cases by habitual litigants, and the granting of endless adjournments, must be discouraged, with courts penalising those who waste the judiciary's time, and delay cases without cause. Of course, the matter of clearing the backlog must be pursued at the highest level; each holder of the position of chief justice of Pakistan should consider it a priority in their tenure to reduce the caseload. Having to wait years, or even decades, for a decision is against natural justice, as litigants have a right to a speedy and fair trial.

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Treason season

THE government seems bent on committing a blunder that will have the opposite result to that which was intended. The federal cabinet has put together a special committee to determine what ‘legal action’ can be taken under Article 6 against former prime minister Imran Khan, President Arif Alvi and the former speaker and deputy speaker of the National Assembly.

The government wants to prosecute the PTI leadership for its ultimately unsuccessful attempt to thwart the vote of no-confidence against then prime minister Imran Khan and the subsequent dissolution of the assemblies by the president.

The PTI has itself to blame for matters coming to this point. It has made a habit of branding political opponents ‘traitors’, which has opened the door for the government to retaliate in kind.

However, the PTI’s immaturity does not need to be perpetuated, especially since the government cannot expect to achieve much with its chosen strategy.

Editorial: Traitor vs traitor

For starters, it should be quite clear by now that the PTI has thrived since its ouster on a narrative of victimhood fed on a craftily constructed perception that it is a lone force battling a multitude of ‘enemies’. It has successfully managed to create a situation where any move to suppress the party or its leaders forcefully only manages to boost their appeal to supporters, which are quite sizable in number. A move to label Mr Khan and company ‘traitors’ is unlikely to bear different results.

Secondly, it is exasperating to see the government pursue Article 6 when the law in question is obviously meant to be applied in very different circumstances. The text of the Constitution states that the charge of high treason will apply to “Any person who abrogates or subverts or suspends or holds in abeyance, or attempts or conspires to abrogate or subvert or suspend or hold in abeyance, the Constitution by use of force or show of force or by any other unconstitutional means”, as well as any person who aids or abets such an attempt.

While the Constitution was indeed violated in this case, it was clearly neither abrogated nor subverted nor suspended nor held in abeyance. Insisting on prosecuting the PTI leadership on these charges only betrays the government's vindictiveness — not a desire to remedy the wrong the former had done.

High treason is a severe crime that ought not to be trivialised. It has been committed on multiple occasions in Pakistan's history by powerful individuals aided and abetted by institutions of the state. It used to find legal sanction from the highest courts of the land. Recently, the state itself made a mockery of the severity of the crime when it said it would welcome Gen Pervez Musharraf, who stands convicted of the crime, back to the country.

In such circumstances, the government's sanctimonious stance rings quite hollow.

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The curtain falls

IT is suddenly all over for Airlift Technologies, one of Pakistan's most celebrated start-ups and a giant in the budding local tech industry. The home-grown company had displayed considerable resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic when it was forced to abandon its original business model — a mass-transit solution to help people get around cheaply and conveniently — due to lockdowns and limitations on people's mobility placed by the government. It had pivoted successfully to instant commerce, helping people in eight major cities order groceries, medicines, meat, fresh fruit and vegetables from the comfort of their home or office through its easy-to-use app. With people stuck indoors during the pandemic, restrictions on shop timings and health concerns preventing many from visiting places with a high public footfall, Airlift rapidly became a household name for its convenience and relative safety. Its meteoric rise saw it become the most funded start-up in the country. With its success, Airlift also lifted other players in the Pakistani tech industry; its stunning initial success brought with it renewed global interest and VC dollars to Pakistan, greatly boosting local players.

Alas, a global decline in funding for tech ventures, soaring fuel prices, and high inflation seem to have become its undoing. The company's sudden falling apart will no doubt spook the industry and invite greater scrutiny for the other players operating in the market. There are, however, upsides to it as well. Airlift's disbandment has released a very talented pool of individuals back into the market, who will take their experience to any new ventures they become part of. Furthermore, while other local companies will no doubt be taking notes on what caused Airlift to implode, they will also take confidence from its journey that nothing can hold Pakistani companies from making their mark in the world. Airlift's end can, in fact, provide new beginnings to many up-and-coming ventures if the right lessons are picked up from the mistakes it made as it grew.

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PTI's triumph

IT is indeed a moment of joy for Imran Khan and his followers. The PTI has won 15 out of 20 provincial seats that were up for grabs in Punjab. Its main rival in the province, the ruling PML-N, could secure only four seats.

Clearly, inflation-stricken voters facing long blackouts appear to have penalised the party for massively raising fuel and power prices for bailout money from the IMF to prop up the economy. But inflation wasn't the only factor that helped the PTI win the Sunday by-polls. There were a host of other factors influencing the voters' choice.

Credit must be given to Imran Khan for running an aggressive campaign — though one built on the flawed premise of a 'foreign conspiracy' — to remove his government ever since a no-confidence motion was moved against him. He also accused the military of siding with his opponents, and doing nothing to thwart the alleged conspiracy against his government. No matter how controversial his narrative, it resonated well with the voters, both in the urban and rural constituencies. The results underscore that the Imran Khan factor, which had prevailed in the 2018 election, has once more helped the PTI to massively sway the electorate, that turned out in record numbers to vote in its favour.

That is not all. The outcome also reflects growing public disaffection with politicians changing loyalty every now and then for personal gains. The PML-N

might have felt 'obliged' to give the PTI defectors tickets in exchange for their votes in the election of chief minister. But the result confirmed that it had made a critical mistake as its decision led to resentment within the party and kept its supporters from turning out on polling day.

The politics and consequences of defections is something to be considered by every party going forward. With the coalition government expected to come under growing pressure for holding fresh polls to seek a mandate once the PTI recaptures Punjab in the run-off election for chief minister on July 22, as ordered by the Supreme Court, it is time for introspection by the PML-N leadership. The party needs to take a deep look at the factors that led to its surprise defeat despite hard campaigning by Maryam Nawaz, and decide if this is a temporary setback or a vote of no-confidence against it due to the tough economic decisions and compromises it chose to make.

Whether the PML-N decides to hold snap polls or complete its term, it might need Nawaz Sharif to return home to heal the divisions within the party and lead it from the front if it wants to win. Irrespective of the potential political and economic fallout of the by-polls, the event offers all parties, especially the PTI, an opportunity to consider more sober, issue-based politics rather than demonising every opponent and institution.

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Biden's Mideast tour

VERY little of substance has emerged from US President Joe Biden's recently concluded tour of Israel and Saudi Arabia. There were plenty of optics, photo ops and sound bites, but few genuine strategic and geopolitical achievements. Perhaps this signals America's diminishing role in the energy-rich and volatile region. Some observers were earlier of the opinion that the US leader's tour would yield an announcement of the official normalisation of ties between Tel Aviv and Riyadh. While the first acknowledged direct flight of an American president from Israel to Saudi Arabia could be described as historic, there was nothing close to a headline-making agreement indicating that the House of Saud was ready to publicly embrace Israel. Mr Biden began the tour in Israel, telling the Jewish state's leadership on the tarmac of Ben Gurion Airport that "you need not be a Jew to be a Zionist". This line was enough to convince those who may

think the US is an honest broker in the Arab-Israeli dispute where Washington's true sympathies lie. Moreover, Mr Biden, in the so-called Jerusalem Declaration, said the US was "willing to use all elements of its national power" to stop an Iranian nuclear weapon. Delivering a threat from Israeli soil will do little to convince Tehran to seal a new nuclear deal. The Palestinians were also given a presidential audience in Bethlehem, though Mr Biden was silent about the illegal settlements that have devoured Arab land.

The next leg of the trip saw the US leader in Jeddah, where Mr Biden exchanged an awkward fist bump with Mohammed bin Salman, crown prince and de facto ruler of the desert kingdom. Apparently, Mr Biden, who had talked tough about Saudi Arabia in the wake of the brutal Jamal Khashoggi murder, was more interested in letting bygones be bygones. The president said he had told the prince there would be consequences "if anything occurs like that again". The American leader's attempts to firm up an anti-Iran alliance involving Israel, as well as asking the Opec states to ramp up oil production to help tame prices, were also met with a cold shoulder during a summit of Arab states in Jeddah. Ultimately, Mr Biden's visit seems to indicate shifting realities in the region. While Arab potentates and strongmen still look up to the US as a patron, they are willing to pursue more independent foreign policies, such as maintaining ties with Russia, that may not align with Washington's vision.

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Covid surge

RECENT Covid-19 fatality numbers should be a cause of great alarm for health authorities in the country. In spite of the threat that these figures pose, regarding the rapid resurgence of the virus over the past month or so, little has changed in terms of the public's response to what can potentially snowball into a major health emergency. Given the continuing negligence and complacency, it was not surprising that 10 people succumbed to Covid this past Saturday — the highest single-day death toll recorded since March 3 this year. The same day, 737 people tested positive for the virus, while 189 were reported to be in critical care. It is understood that the prevalent strains of the coronavirus are milder than those that had wreaked havoc last year and the year before. However, this should not be taken by the authorities to mean that any outbreak of Covid can be taken

lightly. These recent numbers show that brushing the matter under the carpet can prove fatal to those unfortunate souls whose immune systems may be compromised and who are unable to deal with an illness that, in its most dangerous form, has caused millions of deaths across the world.

With political uncertainty has recently become a major distraction for our decision-makers, the fight against Covid should not be interrupted. There is too much at stake. Both the provincial and federal health authorities need to shake off their sloth and adopt greater urgency in their plans to limit the spread of the disease. Merely asking people to cover up, maintain social distance and wash their hands is not going to bear the desired results. There should be stronger enforcement of Covid protocols, especially in those areas where positivity rates are higher than the national average. Most of the deaths on Saturday occurred in Sindh, where urban centres, especially Karachi, had been reporting high positivity rates. The health authorities can be better prepared if containment responses are properly planned and enforced.

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Imran vs the CEC

IT was a perplexing victory speech and one which is bound to leave a bad taste. Despite the PTI upending the assessments of nearly every observer watching the Punjab by-polls with its unexpected sweep of 15 of the 20 seats up for grabs, party chairman Imran Khan continued to attack Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja a day later, accusing him of partiality and attempting to use the Election Commission of Pakistan to swing the results in favour of the PML-N.

One would have expected Mr Khan to have softened his tone, considering that no one was expecting his party to do so well, given how loudly the former prime minister had been claiming that the entire electoral system was rigged. Instead, election day results suggested that it was a fairer contest than most were expecting, with the ruling PML-N handed an embarrassing drubbing on its home turf and the PTI managing to run away with most of the seats despite the odds.

Indeed, given the results, one would argue that the elections seemed quite free and fair and, barring a few incidents of violence, generally well conducted. Therefore, one would have expected the PTI to be a little more appreciative of

the fact that it was ensured a level playing field and that its worst fears never materialised.

Yet, Mr Khan seemed unwilling to let go of his distrust of the CEC. The continuing acrimony does not make sense, considering that the latter seems more focused on quietly going about his constitutional duties and does not seem to be swayed by the relentless campaign against him. Because of the imbalance of power between them, the PTI chief's constant criticism has now started to look like bullying to some observers. They believe that Mr Khan has been constantly attacking and undermining the CEC to pressurise him over the pending decision in the foreign funding case against the former's party.

That may or may not be true, but it is clear that Mr Khan needs to be more direct about why he does not trust Mr Raja and must provide sufficient evidence to substantiate his allegations against him. If the PTI chief wants the CEC gone, there is a political process involved. Haranguing the latter in public is certainly not the way to go about it. There have been recent reports that Mr Raja is worried about his security in light of the threats to his life. He does not deserve to be living in fear for simply doing the job that the Constitution has mandated him to do. Mr Khan should also consider how he would want to be involved in consultations for the next ECP chief, considering he himself has resigned from parliament and seems to have no inclination to sit down with his rivals on any matter, including this one.

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Economic uncertainty

THE PTI's victory in the Punjab by-polls has not only increased political uncertainty by putting a question mark over the fate of the PML-N-led coalition government, it has also deepened economic anxiety, despite the conclusion of a staff-level agreement with the IMF after months of hard negotiations. Markets remain jittery although the government says it has commitments of \$4bn in assistance from friendly countries, besides \$1.2bn in IMF funds. Share prices are falling and the rupee depreciated rapidly to record lows over the last two days because of the prospect of early elections, which the PTI is demanding. After sweeping the by-polls to regain its majority in the Punjab legislature, party leader Imran Khan has said that the country must get ready for polls as "any other path

will only lead to greater political uncertainty and further economic chaos". International creditors are not expecting stability to return in the foreseeable future. The country has a bond repayment due in December — and markets are watching closely to see if Pakistan can meet its obligations in time. The ongoing political and economic crisis has seen the bond's yield surge since February, to reach a record 42pc this month after trading below 10pc since it was issued in 2017, Bloomberg reported.

One of the three major global credit rating agencies, Fitch, revised down Pakistan's outlook from 'stable' to 'negative' a day after the by-polls, citing several reasons for the move, including adjustment risks, (foreign) financing, political hazards and declining reserves. This development came a day after Moody's (which had downgraded Pakistan's outlook to negative last month) termed the expected revival of the IMF package as 'credit positive'. Both agencies have flagged political risks to the IMF programme implementation. "Renewed political volatility cannot be excluded and could undermine the authorities' fiscal and external adjustment, as happened in early 2022 and 2018, particularly in the current environment of slowing growth and high inflation," Fitch said. The political and economic developments of the last two days will have a direct bearing on the welfare of ordinary people trying to cope with multi-year high inflation, increasing job losses and eroding purchasing power. Expecting the economy to stabilise during a time of political uncertainty will be naïve if not outright foolish. It is time for politicians of all hue, especially the PTI, to sit together to build a consensus on political and economic issues critical to the future of this country and its people.

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Indus tragedy

A CELEBRATION was transformed into a horrific tragedy on the Indus on Monday as an overloaded boat filled with wedding guests capsized in the river. As per reports, a wedding party was returning from Rojhan in southern Punjab to the Machka area of Sadiqabad when the calamity struck. The guests were aboard boats to make the river crossing, though one of the vessels was dangerously overloaded as over 100 passengers were piled on to it. At least 21

fatalities have been confirmed — mostly of women and children — and the search for survivors and bodies continued on Tuesday.

The unfortunate truth is that we as a society fail to learn any lessons from such calamities. Loading such a large number of passengers onto a boat was inviting trouble, and it is highly doubtful that any safety gear, such as life jackets, was available. What made the rescue operation even more difficult is the remoteness of the location, as mobile coverage was reportedly unavailable in the area. The transport problem of the population of this riverine area is compounded by the fact that bridges to cross the Indus are at some distance, while many spots are infested with bandits, leaving few safe options to cross the mighty river. Both the Punjab and Sindh governments that share the riverine area must look into creating safe ways for communities to cross the water. Moreover, awareness campaigns should be launched to educate local communities about the dangers of travelling on overloaded or insecure vessels. Overall, there needs to be more emphasis on promoting a culture of safety nationally. Whether it is tragedies such as the boat incident, horrible traffic accidents due to overloaded vehicles or rash driving, the collapse of hazardous buildings or other avoidable calamities, safety seems to be on the bottom of the list of priorities for both the people and the state. This apathetic attitude must change in order to save precious lives. There can be no shortcuts when it comes to safety.

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The decision to stay

THE next few months will reveal whether or not the decision taken by the PML-N to continue governing until the present assemblies complete their term is a wise one.

The PML-N-led coalition government feels that while it has successfully concluded the restoration of the suspended bailout package with the IMF after months of tough negotiations, it has had to pay a heavy political price for making some tough economic decisions, thus losing its majority in the Punjab Assembly. But there's also a strong feeling within the coalition that the economy will start to improve as a result of its stabilisation decisions, however harsh, and expected dollar flows from multilateral lenders and friendly Gulf nations.

The ongoing currency and stock market turmoil is being interpreted by Finance Minister Miftah Ismail as a temporary phenomenon caused by political uncertainty after the by-election outcome. To the coalition, therefore, it makes little sense to throw in the towel and concede to the demand of Imran Khan's PTI to quit and hold early elections.

Rather, the PML-N and its allies want to try and save the Hamza Shehbaz government in Punjab where the PTI and its ally, the PML-Q, now command a majority in the assembly and appear all set to get Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi elected as the new chief minister in the run-off election on Friday.

The PTI, on the other hand, is likely to mount further pressure on the coalition government at the centre for early polls in the country and push its agenda more vigorously than ever before once it recaptures Punjab. Some PML-N leaders have already promised the PTI snap polls should Imran Khan agree to dissolve the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies. Whether or not he takes the bait to build up greater pressure on Islamabad is the question.

Nonetheless, it is quite clear that the PTI isn't going to relent on its demand for fresh polls, and will keep the ruling coalition busy on the political front throughout the remainder of its tenure.

Editorial: Economic uncertainty

This brings us to the real issue: does the PML-N and its allies have what it takes to focus on the flagging economy and make life easier for the common people in the face of mounting pressure from Imran Khan — especially if the PTI-PML-Q combine succeeds in snatching Punjab away from the party?

Politically, things are going to become more difficult for the PML-N in the days to come, particularly if it loses its stronghold to its rival, eventually distracting its focus away from the economy. Thus, it is time for the PML-N and its allies to weigh the political costs of sticking to power just for the sake of it.

The wiser option may be to seek a fresh, clear public mandate, instead of completing the term. The sooner it makes the decision the better for its future electoral prospects.

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Tehraan summit

THE power of images in international politics can sometimes send much stronger messages than verbose statements laced with diplomatic jargon. Certainly, the photograph of the presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkiye meeting for a summit in Tehran — hands clasped warmly — was likely designed to send multiple messages to various audiences. But perhaps the underlying sentiment behind the meet-up was that while the three states may differ radically on some issues, they are willing to join forces to forge ahead in areas of common interest. The three states indeed make strange bedfellows. Russia and China, with Iran as a junior partner, are part of an emerging global bloc that has challenged the US-led order. Turkiye, on the other hand, is a card-carrying member of Nato, the Western military grouping both Russia and Iran detest. Moreover, the meeting in Tehran was held to discuss Syria, where the trio's interests diverge greatly. If it were not for Russian and Iranian military intervention, Bashar al-Assad's government would have fallen long ago, while Turkiye has been a strong backer of anti-Assad rebels. Ankara has also reportedly supplied Ukraine with drones the latter is using against Russian forces. And Russia maintains cordial relations with Israel, an arch-enemy of the Islamic Republic. But in the midst of these apparent contradictions, reports from the summit tell us that Russia signed a \$40bn agreement to invest in Iran's oil and gas sector, while an agreement between Ankara and Tehran worth \$30bn to develop trade and energy ties was also inked.

Clearly, Russia and Iran are saying to the West that the sanctions placed on both states for different reasons will not prevent them from forging ahead with geopolitical cooperation. Turkiye, on the other hand, is hedging its bets; though it wants to maintain ties with the West, it is not willing to isolate Russia and Iran, its neighbours in the region. The Ukraine conflict has basically thrown the West-dominated post-World War II and post-Cold War global order into disarray, and what we are seeing are the first steps towards a new multipolar world. In a related development, senior Iranian official Kamal Kharrazi said in an interview that Iran had "the technical capability to build a nuclear bomb", but no decision had been taken in this regard as yet. Instead of responding to American threats with such rhetoric, Tehran should leverage its relations with Turkiye and Russia to finalise a better nuclear deal.

Rising HIV/AIDS cases

IT is unfortunate that in our country, the actions and attitudes of healthcare providers, people who are responsible for protecting us from ill health, become one of the reasons for the prevalence of disease. Certainly, they appear to be a major factor in driving up the number of HIV/AIDS cases in the country. The 2019 HIV/AIDS outbreak in Larkana is proof. While the cases of HIV/AIDS have decreased globally, in Pakistan they reportedly increased by 84pc between 2010 and 2020. At present, there are around 200,000 HIV/AIDS cases in the country, with thousands being reported every year. Against this backdrop, the revelation by health experts at a recent seminar in Karachi was insightful. According to them, 65pc of HIV/AIDS patients did not return for treatment due to the problematic behaviour of their healthcare providers.

Another key factor in the spread of the disease is the widespread use of contaminated medical equipment by healthcare providers. This condemnable practice is responsible not only for a number of HIV/AIDS cases but also for other blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis B and C. Pakistan already has one of the highest case volumes of hepatitis C while hepatitis B infections are also rising at an alarming rate. It is a well-documented fact that more than 70pc of hepatitis B and C infections in Pakistan are transmitted at healthcare set-ups. Moreover, the lack of monitoring at health outlets and of medics also contributes to the problem. Meanwhile, another important aspect of the HIV/AIDS challenge is the stigma attached to the disease that prevents the reporting of symptoms at clinics and hospitals. People avoid doing so because contracting HIV is considered a shame in society, inviting derision from relatives and even doctors. The Sindh government recently launched a drug for high-risk populations and couples. However, unless the government actively works towards reducing the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and penalises doctors who put their patients' health at risk, the success in curbing the spread of the disease would be limited.

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Political machinations

POLITICIANS never learn. What should have been a straightforward walkover for the joint candidate of the PTI and PML-Q after the alliance's triumph in the Sunday by-poll is no longer a certainty. The run-off election for chief minister of Punjab today has been tainted by allegations of horse-trading as the ruling coalition led by the PML-N makes a last-ditch effort to save the minority Hamza Shehbaz government.

Political horse-trading is not a new phenomenon in Pakistani politics. Starting with the 'abduction' of independent lawmakers by the then PML back in 1988 to deny the PPP a chance to muster its majority in the provincial assembly and to get its own candidate elected as chief minister, almost every major political party, including the PTI, has mastered the art — with generous help from the intelligence apparatus.

The way Imran Khan was supported by the agencies that coerced many contestants in Punjab fielded by the PML-N to either quit the race or seek PTI tickets to stay in the competition in the run-up to the 2018 elections is still a fresh memory. More recently, the parties of the ruling coalition have been accused of offering money and rewards to entice several PTI lawmakers to break away, so that the PML-N can retain Punjab and keep its government at the centre secure.

There were hopes that after being crushed in the by-polls — a major reason for their defeat was the fielding of candidates who had deserted the PTI — the PML-N and its allies would not repeat their mistake of engineering defections. The statements from PML-N leaders conceding their party's defeat in the by-polls had reinforced hopes that the ugly scenes witnessed during the election of Hamza Shehbaz would not be repeated in the Punjab Assembly this time. Sadly, that does not seem to be happening.

Ideally, the ruling coalition should have asked the provincial government to resign after it became clear that the opposition had regained its majority in the assembly after the by-polls. Short of that, it was expected that the PML-N and its allies would at least keep away from turning their minority into a majority through horse-trading. But its fears of being confined to Islamabad have led PML-N and its coalition partners to take the unsavoury route in their attempt to save the current administration in Punjab.

It will be no service to the cause of democracy if the situation turns violent in today's session. If democracy is to move forward, the PML-N and its allies must take a step back and refrain from any move that is unethical or that violates the law and Constitution. If they fear that a hostile PTI-PML-Q administration in Pakistan's most populous province will be a hurdle in the way of implementation of its political and economic agenda, they should hold early elections to seek a fresh mandate.

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LG polls' delay

THE postponement of the second phase of local government elections in Sindh, which was scheduled for Sunday, is a matter of concern for all those who want elected local bodies in the province. The decision announced by the ECP on Wednesday on the recommendation of the Sindh administration has been taken due to the forecast of heavy rains, as well as the advent of Muharram. The first phase of the polls was held last month, while the ECP has now pushed back voting for the second phase — which primarily affects Karachi and Hyderabad — till Aug 28. A by-election for Karachi's NA-245 seat, which was due on July 27 will now be held on Aug 21. Though the PPP and MQM have likely breathed a sigh of relief after the announcement, the Jamaat-i-Islami and PTI are furious over the decision. The PTI says it will challenge the rescheduling in court, while JI says it will protest over the "conspiracy against democracy".

It is to be hoped that the delay isn't a ploy to indefinitely shelve the holding of polls for the third tier in Sindh. LG polls were last held in 2015, and the city of Karachi has been without an elected municipal head since mid-2020. In the meantime, administrators reporting to the PPP-led Sindh government have been running the show. Suffice it to say, the PPP has never been a strong advocate for elected local bodies in Sindh, particularly in the urban areas where its vote bank is limited. The MQM and PTI, meanwhile, had both gone to court on the plea that electoral rolls were not ready and delimitation was incomplete. It is true that inclement weather — it is abundantly clear that even moderate rains can paralyse Karachi — would create problems for voters. Moreover, the first 10 days of Muharram, which starts at the end of this month, also require the administration to put in extra efforts where security is concerned. However, there

should be no indefinite delays beyond the new date announced by the ECP. This paper has always argued that Karachi — indeed all of Sindh's urban areas — can only prosper through elected, empowered municipal heads. Municipal services were arguably much better when elected mayors — Niamatullah Khan and Mustafa Kamal — were in charge. Both the Sindh administration and the ECP must dispel misgivings that a plan is afoot to deny Sindh's people their constitutional right to elected representatives at the third tier.

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Absurd jirga decision

IT has been observed that the cacophony of national politics often drowns out the real societal issues of the day. Thanks to the ongoing electoral brouhaha, the reports of a tribal jirga in Bajaur district slapping a complete ban on women visiting tourist spots in the area went relatively unnoticed by both the government and mainstream media. A council of tribal elders in Salarzai tehsil decreed that women cannot visit local tourist or picnic spots, even when accompanied by male family members. While the tribal districts are usually more conservative than the rest of the country, in issuing this ludicrous decree, the Salarzai jirga appears to have gone one step further than even the regressive Afghan Taliban. The obliviousness of state institutions to this 'decree' is condemnable; unfortunately, there has been very little effort by most politicians in this country to stop the effective erasure of women from public life in many parts and to hold to account those who deprive them of their fundamental rights. It is a situation that exposes the sheer hypocrisy of those who claim to stand for democracy: the jirga was organised by the local chapter of the JUI-F, one of the coalition members at the centre. The gathering of elders was reportedly attended by a number of party members.

According to the jirga, visiting tourist or picnic spots in the area by women went against local Islamic traditions. Moreover, the council demanded that the local authorities implement their decision by next Sunday, otherwise, they would do so themselves. Considering how the tribal region has been wracked by religious extremism and militancy, do we really need to point out how perilous this trend would be if left unaddressed? In an environment where women struggle to be educated and to vote, such an order by a parallel justice system is a mockery of

the state's writ, besides being a direct assault on the marginalised women of the area. The government needs to put a stop to this before others are inspired to follow suit.

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Election farce

THE winner of the election for the Punjab chief executive seemed apparent on the final count — 186 votes in favour of Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi of the PML-Q, 179 in favour of the PML-N's Hamza Shehbaz. Yet Deputy Speaker Dost Muhammad Mazari's bizarre decision to reject the PML-Q's 10 votes from the final count completely upended the result, spoiling Chaudhry Pervaiz's victory and handing the Punjab crown back to the PML-N.

The ruling will buy more time in power for Hamza Shehbaz, but it has only worsened the prevailing political instability. Article 63A is clear on the point that it is the parliamentary party, not the party head, that sets the party line on voting in the four specific scenarios outlined in the same article. However, since the deputy speaker has taken cover behind the Supreme Court's recent decision on defections to dismiss the PML-Q parliamentary party's decision, the court itself will now be expected to elucidate on its ruling on the matter.

The election result capped a day full of drama. The inspector-general of Punjab Police was abruptly sacked and replaced hours before the voting took place. The Punjab Assembly went into session almost three hours behind schedule, with a row of policemen in plainclothes standing behind Mr Mazari throughout to provide him 'protection'.

Then, moments before the proceedings finally began, the media began reporting a seismic split in the PML-Q's senior leadership. Party scion Moonis Elahi told journalists that his uncle, Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, the party head of the PML-Q, had told party MPs not to vote for his father Chaudhry Pervaiz. He was quoted as saying that a day earlier, PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari, speaking on behalf of the ruling alliance, had offered to make Chaudhry Pervaiz chief minister, but as the coalition's candidate and not as the PTI's. He said his father had rejected the offer, but matters quickly took a very different turn.

Even though the parliamentary party unanimously voted for Chaudhry Pervaiz, the debate over the legal consequences of Chaudhry Shujaat's decision as head of the party overtook all other commentaries on the election. Mr Mazari's eventual ruling simply confirmed that an outcome that had been least expected till hours before the election had suddenly become a reality.

The ruling coalition might be thankful for Mr Zardari's late-night machinations, but they have done little to solve the multiple crises Pakistan is mired in. In fact, this episode will open another unneeded chapter for judicial intervention in the political domain. It also does not send an encouraging message to observers watching keenly from abroad, who hold the key to bailing the country out of the economic quagmire it is neck-deep in. The government's plans for an economic turnaround will remain nigh impossible to execute, with the fate of its largest province still far from decided.

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Selling energy

WITH electricity rapidly becoming unaffordable and supplies more erratic in spite of surplus generation capacity, businesses and middle-class households are quietly embracing solar power in cities and villages across the country. The increase in rooftop solar power can be measured by the fact that the net-metered solar power generation inducted into the national grid has surged to 419MW, according to a report in this paper. The measures taken by Nepra as well as the power distribution companies to make it easy for households and business owners seeking net-metering or generation licences to become part of the national grid have contributed in a big way to this shift over the last couple of years. Net-metering licences allow consumers to sell surplus solar power to their respective distribution companies. Nonetheless, the adoption of the abundantly available renewable energy resource is still painfully slow when compared to India, China and other countries, in spite of the improvement in technology, decrease in upfront installation costs, ease in securing generation licences and concessionary bank loans for the purchase of solar equipment. The slower shift becomes more critical in view of the fact that Pakistan has one of the largest unserved populations in the world as far as electrification is concerned and has huge potential for leapfrogging in the renewable energy sector.

International studies show that Pakistan's sunny climate grants it enormous potential for cheaper solar power generation. Currently, the share of wind and solar renewables in the overall energy mix remains a paltry 4pc — solar share being just 1.6pc — compared to 64pc thermal generation, 27pc hydropower and 5pc nuclear power. Post-Covid global fuel supply disruptions and skyrocketing oil and gas prices show that Pakistan must push for early adoption of local fuels, especially renewable resources, to cut its reliance on expensive, imported fossil fuels and save foreign exchange. Renewable energy is more environment-friendly and cheaper than hydel power. The government is expected to announce its new solar power policy early next month. The policy should incorporate measures such as the provision of free or heavily subsidised solar equipment to low-income households using less than 100 units a month, ease procedures to allow other consumers, including small businesses, unfettered access to the concessionary bank loans, and reduce net-metering fees to quicken the adoption of rooftop solar adoption. Unless more incentives are given, the plan to increase the share of renewables in the energy mix to 30pc by 2030 will remain a pipe dream.

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Child abuse epidemic

CHILDREN already have a rough deal in this society, but frequent cases of child abuse point to a deep sickness that is simply not being treated. Along with the physical world, digital spaces are also highly dangerous for minors, as the horrific number of images of child exploitation uploaded to Facebook indicate. According to the FIA director general as well as officials of Meta, which owns Facebook, over 2m explicit images of children were uploaded from Pakistan in 2021. Speaking at a seminar in Karachi on Thursday, the FIA DG said that over the last five years only 343 cases related to indecent pictures of children have been reported. This indicates that much greater action from the state, social media companies, as well as the public, is required to punish the criminals involved in these horrific crimes, and protect youngsters from abuse.

It was thought that after the shocking 2015 Kasur child pornography scandal and the brutal murder of little Zainab, who was abducted from the same city, state and society would have taken firm action against child abusers. Sadly, perhaps

because children are so low on our priority list, after the initial rage few tangible actions, apart from the enacting the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery law, have been taken to protect minors, as the massive number of exploitative images cited above indicates. There can simply be no lethargy when it comes to child safety. Social media firms and law-enforcement must respectively take down these images immediately, and track down those responsible for uploading them. There needs to be a concerted effort involving all major social media firms, including Meta, Google, TikTok etc, because child safety is everyone's issue. The gangs involved in these heinous crimes must be smashed and given exemplary punishment, while exploited children and their families should be given professional care to help them deal with the trauma of abuse. Moreover, the #ReportDontShare campaign needs to be supported by the public, so that crimes against children can be duly reported to the authorities, and those involved punished.

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Courting instability

AND so it begins: another unwanted chapter in the sordid saga of present-day Pakistani politics. With yet another dispute failing to reach a resolution within the political domain, the ball is once again in the august court.

Once again, the country's political leadership has gone running to tug on the judges' robes to ask for an intervention in political squabbles they remain unable to solve on their own. At stake is the rulership of the country's most populous (and prosperous) province — the crown jewel of Pakistan's electorate. Also at stake is the country's economic stability.

Editorial: Dost Mazari's ruling may buy Hamza more time but it has only worsened political instability

Policymakers at the centre remain on the tightrope, hoping fervently that the IMF will disregard the fresh fire burning in Pakistan's front yard and lend us our much-needed dollars before the entire house goes up in flames.

Hamza Shehbaz is once again 'trustee' chief minister till Monday. Only the Supreme Court can possibly elucidate what that means. He has reportedly been directed to work in accordance with the law and Constitution and desist from

using his powers as chief minister for personal benefit. All appointments he makes must be merit-based, and any appointment he makes otherwise is to be struck down. In any 'normal' country, those would be the basics of the job.

One also wonders what the court expects Hamza Shehbaz to attempt in the two odd days till his fate is, presumably, to be more permanently decided. Meanwhile, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi has been handed some salve to put on the wound inflicted by his cousin — he may have hope yet of a judgement in his favour. The only thing certain at the moment is that the Punjab chief minister's election is far from decided, and there may be a twist or two along the way.

Amidst all the noise, there is renewed talk of a 'soft' intervention by powers that had so far insisted they would remain on the sidelines. Apparently, they now want to see the warring parties sit down and negotiate a date for general elections. There is fresh possibility of polls as early as October. It would seem that they have, once again, decided that the politicians can't be left to themselves.

However, it is unlikely that the ruling coalition, and especially the PML-N, will see eye to eye with them — not when they are waist-deep in the messy (but necessary) effort to correct the economy's course. The July 17 drubbing will be fresh in many minds, and it is unlikely that any of the ruling parties would be favouring their chances when the PTI, led by a reinvigorated Imran Khan, is on the rampage. It remains to be seen, therefore, if the 'soft' intervention will harden into a sterner one, and what the reaction to that will be. All signs point to a further worsening of the political climate in the weeks ahead.

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Humane visa regime

THE fact that the visit of a senior citizen from India to her ancestral home in Rawalpindi made news speaks volumes for the level of difficulties involved in the Pakistan-India visa process. Perhaps in most other countries if a foreigner were to visit the land of one's roots it would be a routine affair. But not so in the subcontinent.

Reena Varma, who left for the other side with her family when she was a teenager, received a warm welcome when she arrived at her ancestral house in

the garrison city. Ms Varma had been trying for decades to secure a visa, and only succeeded after the intervention of a Facebook group dedicated to Pakistan-India friendship and Pakistan's minister of state for foreign affairs.

The generation that witnessed the partition period and still has memories of it is fast fading. Many of those who are left, on both sides of the border, want to catch a glimpse of their ancestral hometown before they leave this world. They should be facilitated on humanitarian grounds by both the governments, despite the latter's mutual mistrust. Earlier this year, there was a touching story about how two brothers separated at partition were reunited through the Kartarpur Corridor.

Along with senior citizens, many divided families also face a torturous process obtaining a visa for the other country. While India does allow visa on arrival for those over 65, seniors need to have a voluminous ream of documents with them in order to be allowed in, including a sponsorship certificate from an Indian citizen. This cumbersome process basically negates the concept of visa on arrival. As for divided families applying to visit India, the paperwork requirements are equally complex, while even Pakistanis with foreign passports need to go through a tedious, lengthy procedure.

Pakistan also requires extensive documentation for Indians wanting to visit this country, while police reporting requirements on both sides add an unwanted, unfriendly layer of bureaucracy to the journey. Perhaps the toxicity that has characterised bilateral ties for the past 75 years can be reduced somewhat if people are allowed to travel easily between the two countries. The process should definitely be made easier for senior citizens whose birthplace now lies beyond the border of their country of citizenship, as well as for divided families. Perhaps if travel restrictions are eased, both states can one day replace hatred and mistrust with a more civilised, neighbourly relationship.

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On top of the world

IN the space of three hours on Friday, Pakistan saw its first two women set foot on its highest point. At 7:42am, Samina Baig became the first woman from the country to conquer K2 — the world's second-highest peak. She was soon followed by Naila Kiani. For Samina, arguably Pakistan's greatest female

mountaineer, K2 had been the ultimate dream, even though she'd made history by becoming the first Muslim woman to scale Mount Everest in 2013. She had tried several times previously to conquer the 'Savage Mountain', only to come up short in her bid. This time though, during the country's busiest mountaineering season in over two decades, she was successful. For Dubai-based Naila, who last year became the country's first woman to have conquered an 8,000m peak — Gasherbrum-II — in Pakistan, it was remarkably her first attempt on K2. It wasn't only women from Pakistan making history on K2 on Friday, when over 100 mountaineers summited. Bangladeshi climber Wasfia Nazreen and Taiwan's Grace Tseng became the first from their countries to scale the mountain. Iranian Afsaneh Hesamifard, Lebanese-Saudi Nelly Attar and Oman's Nadhira Alharthy, meanwhile, became the first women from their respective countries to summit K2.

The plaudits came immediately for Samina. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif described her as a symbol of determination, courage and bravery for Pakistani women. However, Samina's journey is of her own making. Samina, who is the first woman from Pakistan to have conquered the Seven Summits — the highest peak in every continent — has not only scaled peaks that mountaineers of all nationalities and genders risk their lives to climb but has done it by securing financial support through her own efforts. She has not received government funding for her summits. Instead, she's achieved funds through the help of private individuals and sponsors. If anything, Samina and Naila's feats on Friday should become a watershed moment for mountaineering in Pakistan. For a country blessed with three of the world's most famous mountain ranges, the government must do more to support its aspiring climbers.

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Hotbed of militancy

AS the world confronts financial and political crises, as well as a full-blown war in Ukraine that threatens to expand, a familiar threat lurks in Afghanistan that has the capability to upend regional and global peace.

As highlighted by a recently released UN report, Al Qaeda and the self-styled Islamic State group are operating unhindered in Afghanistan, while the TTP is said to oversee the largest group of foreign terrorists on Afghan soil. Few people

have to be reminded of the trail of blood all three of the aforementioned terrorist groups have left across the world, and the international community can only ignore the warning signs at its own peril.

While it is true that transnational militant groups were operating in Afghanistan even as the US/Nato military machine maintained a heavy footprint in that country, after Kabul fell to the Afghan Taliban last year, fears grew that once more Afghanistan would become a hotbed of international terrorism.

Clearly, those concerns were not unfounded.

Editorial: UN report on terrorism

For example, the UN report says Al Qaeda supremo Ayman al Zawahiri is silently, but openly, operating in Afghanistan. Of course, the present Taliban rulers don't need to be reminded that their previous regime also fell because they had hosted the Al Qaeda leadership, which had attracted the wrath of the US following 9/11.

Moreover, after IS was largely routed from the Levant, it found in Afghanistan an atmosphere conducive to conducting its activities. Today, the Afghan set-up of the 'caliphate

is one of its most active chapters, attracting religious militants from across the world.

For Pakistan, it should be a matter of great concern that the TTP, with which the state is pursuing peace talks, maintains thousands of fighters just across the border in Afghanistan. In case negotiations fall through, the state needs to have a contingency plan in place to neutralise such a large number of militants.

Of course, the key question that arises from these findings is what should be done about the militant threat.

The primary responsibility to get rid of safe spaces for terrorists in Afghanistan lies with the Taliban rulers. They had promised they would not let their soil be used against other countries, and now it is time for them to deliver on this.

Moreover, the international legitimacy they crave will always elude the Taliban if they continue to shelter, or ignore, global terrorists.

Regional states — specifically Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian states — must individually and collectively put pressure on the Taliban to not allow Afghanistan to once more become a global base for terrorism. Instead of the flawed military adventurism undertaken by the Western bloc, regional states and the international community must warn the Taliban that trade and diplomatic ties will be impossible if groups like Al Qaeda, IS and the TTP continue to find shelter in their country.

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Hike in power rates

EVER SINCE it came to power, the coalition government has been navigating a difficult path. Given the fragile economy it inherited from the previous government, amid speculations of an imminent default, the coalition, led by the PML-N, has had little to no room to protect people from economic hardships resulting from the painful decisions it has been forced to take to fix the deep economic imbalances in the last three months. Its job is made even more difficult by the IMF whose support and bailout package Pakistan direly needs to avoid defaulting. The crippling increase of Rs7.91 per unit in power prices, which boosts the national average electricity tariff to Rs24.82 per unit from the existing Rs16.91, from July, is just one of several unpopular decisions — that include the reversal of fiscally unsustainable fuel subsidies and the imposition of massive taxes in the budget — the government has taken in order to obtain dollars from the IMF and other multilateral and bilateral creditors. In doing so, the coalition partners have lost much political capital as was manifest in the crushing defeat of the PML-N in the by-elections in its bastion of Punjab.

That the new electricity prices are going to unleash a new round of hyperinflation, which is projected to average above 20pc during the present fiscal, is an understatement. Crushed by multi-year high energy and food prices, the new wave of inflation is going to badly hit low- to middle-income families. With living becoming unaffordable for most of us, the possibility of political and social unrest cannot be ruled out. The worst part of the story is that the economy is not showing any sign of stabilising even after subjecting people to such pain and the conclusion of an agreement with the IMF. The ‘relief’ that might have come in the wake of declining international energy prices has been eroded by an

unprecedented drop in the value of the rupee in the last three months and a deepening of the economic mess thanks to the ongoing political circus. The situation has come to a point where no party or government can salvage it single-handedly in the foreseeable future. If the economy is to turn around and the hardships of the inflation-stricken people lessen, the politicians will have to sit together and learn to tackle their differences in a civilised manner within the ambit of the Constitution.

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New NAB chief

IT feels as if the post had become nearly synonymous with retired justice Javed Iqbal. So full of controversy was his nearly five-year tenure as chief of the National Accountability Bureau that it seemed he didn't spend a week out of the media limelight. Yet all things must come to an end, and Mr Iqbal's bombastic run as NAB chairman ended last month with barely a whimper. The incumbent government and its self-chosen opposition leader have now appointed in his stead former IB chief Aftab Sultan. Mr Sultan was generally well-regarded and considered a professional bureaucrat before his retirement as a BS-22 officer of the Police Service of Pakistan. However, he mostly served on posts that generally operate away from the public eye — very unlike the post of chairman NAB, which is hyper-exposed to both the media and public scrutiny. He will, therefore, have to strive anew to establish himself as an even-handed, unbiased head of an institution that has earned great notoriety for its repeated failures to act without prejudice. The resurgent PTI, which focuses most of its politics on accountability, remains out of parliament and therefore had little say in his appointment. It will likely fight tooth and nail if and when it finds reason to attack Mr Sultan's integrity. It is critical, that he tread with care and, of course, without prejudice.

Accountability has been turned into a travesty in Pakistan due to the repeated failure of responsible officials and institutions to successfully investigate and prosecute corruption and graft. Instead, it has come to stand for underhanded tactics used to soil the reputation of bitter political opponents or those who have fallen afoul of the powers that be and ensnare them in endless and frustrating legal cases. It is time that this serious issue stopped being dealt with so

frivolously. The new NAB chief will need to introduce a culture of constant diligence and respect for due process if he is to return any credibility to NAB.

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Collision course

It is, of course, the chief justice of Pakistan's prerogative to appoint a bench at his discretion to hear any case brought before the Supreme Court, yet many will view the decision yesterday to dismiss all demands for the formation of a full court bench to hear Punjab Assembly Deputy Speaker Dost Mazari's ruling in the chief minister's election held on July 22 in a different light.

Despite criticism and questions about the 'integrity' of the three-member bench hearing the case, the court decided to proceed with the same bench, reasoning that the matter did not seem to be of such grave importance that a full court bench be constituted to hear it.

Observers are now expecting the crisis to turn into a three-way showdown between the civilian leadership, the judiciary and, perhaps, the establishment. At the centre of the confrontation is a Supreme Court interpretation of Article 63-A; specifically, a short order from a five-member bench regarding the treatment of votes cast by lawmakers deemed to have defected from their party. The order in question was instrumental in the ejection of 25 PTI MPAs from the Punjab Assembly in May, and, more recently, in the overturning of the victory of PML-Q's Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi in the July 22 election for Punjab chief minister.

Critics say the current crisis arose because the Supreme Court had, while interpreting 63-A in its initial verdict, effectively rewritten the Constitution and yet not issued its detailed ruling on the matter, creating a lacuna that the PDM successfully exploited. Those who defend the Supreme Court say that the critics are, either deliberately or innocently, misconstruing the Supreme Court judgement, and that Mr Mazari completely misinterpreted the judgement to arrive at his desired conclusion.

With the PDM coalition now looking like it is in the mood for a fight, it seems that we may be heading towards another clash of institutions. In a forceful Monday afternoon press conference, key PDM leaders had called on the chief justice to requisition a full-court bench to deliberate Mr Mazari's ruling on the CM election.

Other government representatives had threatened to otherwise boycott court proceedings, questioning why the “same three judges” hear cases that concern them.

The subtle accusations of partiality were unnecessary, but given the gravity of the situation and the severity of the crisis at hand, the Supreme Court should perhaps have considered the ‘request’ more generously than it did. If not politicians, it should have considered the advice of multiple former presidents of the Supreme Court Bar Association as well as former SHC chief justice Maqbool Baqar, who had recommended a full court bench to hear the matter.

A full court indeed seemed like an appropriate forum to settle with finality the controversy and debate over various interpretations of Article 63-A, but one fears the matter will continue to linger in the weeks and months ahead.

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Rain disaster

TO say that the 2022 monsoon season has been exceptionally challenging for Pakistan would be an understatement. The relentless wet weather has pummelled the country, wreaking havoc on infrastructure in rural areas as well as the cities. A statement from the minister for climate change a few weeks ago said that the 30-year average for rainfall in Sindh and Balochistan had been broken. With the latest weather system unleashing rainfall in both the provinces, another record may well be smashed. According to NDMA figures, over 300 people have died in rain-related incidents, with Balochistan reporting the highest deaths. Destruction of property has also been considerable, as around 9,000 houses have partially or completely been damaged. Sindh’s urban areas — still reeling from earlier rain spells — were again pounded by heavy precipitation that started early Sunday morning and continued till Monday. The high volume of rainfall has resulted in familiar misery: flooded roads, deaths due to electrocution, electricity breakdowns and the paralysis of normal life. So extensive were the problems caused by heavy rainfall that the Sindh government declared a holiday in Karachi and Hyderabad on Monday.

With extreme weather events likely to become the norm due to climate change, a contingency plan is essential to save lives and minimise damage to property and

infrastructure. While major drains were cleaned in Karachi after the uproar that was raised following the 2020 monsoon disaster, clearly the problem requires a deeper analysis to arrive at workable solutions. For rural areas, early warning systems should be in place that can enable swift evacuation of vulnerable populations in case of flash floods or hill torrents. In the cities, where drainage systems have collapsed and the concrete jungle has choked natural rainwater run-off channels, a progressive plan of action needs to be implemented to prevent urban flooding. Several suggestions are in the field, including those offered by the multinational C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, of which Karachi is a member. These include creating flood maps; flood modelling; creating spaces that can store rainwater; replacing concrete with permeable surfaces and improving green cover. Bangkok, for example, has created a park that can store millions of gallons of water. Many of these interventions don't require massive funding. However, what they do need is a solid commitment from all tiers of government to ensure implementation. If Pakistan is to progressively deal with the consistent threat of heavy rainfall, planning and implementation of such steps is essential.

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Lifting import ban

THERE is no doubt that tariff and non-tariff barriers on imports are bad for the economy as they put serious constraints on growth sustainability. However, the coalition government thought it best to temporarily stop the import of 38 non-essential and luxury items a little over two months ago to plug the haemorrhaging of meagre foreign exchange reserves since total inbound shipments surged to a record \$80bn during the last fiscal against the target of \$55bn on the back of a tough external environment. The latter features high commodity and oil prices and a hike in US interest rates. The import of another 25 products was also restricted by subjecting importers to prior State Bank approval. Now the government plans to gradually lift these restrictions as it expects dollar inflows from friendly countries in the current week to be followed by the release of IMF funds that will unlock other multilateral financial help to shore up our dwindling foreign exchange reserves. The decision was made to boost the depressive market mood although restrictions on mobile phones and automobiles will stay for an unspecified length of time. The expensive phone and automobile

shipments already in the import process at the time of the announcement of the ban have nonetheless been cleared against the payment of an additional surcharge of 5pc to 15pc to save importers from losses.

The start of the removal of restrictions on specified products will also improve market confidence in the beleaguered government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and help reduce the prevailing economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, the government should refrain from overstretching itself and walk slowly. There are a number of items on the list of banned imports that we can do without. The import of such items must be made more expensive and difficult even when the ban is lifted. Despite multilateral and bilateral commitments, we are still far from standing on our own feet and simply cannot afford to lose our borrowed dollars to unnecessary imports for the wealthy.

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An expected change in Punjab

THE contentious Supreme Court decision striking down Deputy Speaker Dost Mohammad Mazari's controversial ruling that disregarded the votes of 10 PML-Q lawmakers in the run-off election for Punjab chief minister has raised serious questions about the fate of the coalition government in Islamabad and the PML-N's future in the province.

In its widely anticipated judgement on a petition filed by Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, the three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Umar Bandial ordered the immediate notification of the success of the petitioner in the election for chief minister, paving the way for a change in the country's most populous province an political heartland.

Earlier, the court had dismissed a request from the lawyers representing Mr Mazari, the now ousted chief minister Hamza Shehbaz, PML-Q president Chaudhry Shujaat Husain — whose letter instructing party legislators to not vote was cited by Mr Mazari as the reason for disregarding their votes — and others, including the Supreme Court Bar Association, to form a full court for hearing the case.

The decision is more likely to compound the existing politico-legal crisis than tackle it even if it leads to early elections as demanded by the PTI and its leader

Imran Khan. Nonetheless, it is clear that the change in the political scene after the top court's decision will prove to be the most massive setback for the PML-N in its history; the party will now be facing the music it orchestrated for others in the past when it would use its power base in Punjab to ambush the governments of its political rivals at the centre.

A resurgent Imran Khan and his PTI have not just snatched the PML-N's citadel in Lahore, they are also threatening to shake the very foundations of its weak power in Islamabad. It is only a matter of time before the coalition faces increased pressure from all corners, especially the PTI, for early elections, which will be difficult for it to handle with a hostile administration in the largest province.

Will the PML-N be able to fight and take back its political stronghold from the PTI if early elections are held? That is the question. So far, the party has lagged behind its resurgent rival and appears to have no strategy to counter its moves, political or legal. With Imran Khan emerging as the most popular leader it will be hard for the establishment, judiciary, bureaucracy or business elite to write him off.

That's what the verdict underlines. Confined to Islamabad with its coalition partners, the PML-N leadership has limited options to survive the remaining term of the present assemblies and no room for manoeuvre in Punjab. The only choice for it from here on is to forge a stronger alliance with the other parties — most of them already a part of the coalition — in the next elections and beyond to salvage its politics.

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Ulema in Kabul

WHILE attacks by militants on Pakistani forces continue, the state is still strangely committed to suing for peace with the banned TTP. The latest effort involves sending a delegation of ulema to Kabul to see if the TTP would be willing to 'soften' their stance. Led by Mufti Taqi Usmani, the group includes some of the country's other top Deobandi scholars, as well as JUI-F senator Talha Mahmood. As reported in this paper, the delegation was briefed by officials before leaving Islamabad for the Afghan capital. The effort to send clerics to see if the TTP would be amenable to negotiations follows the visit last month by a

jirga of Pakhtun tribes that also tried to talk peace with the militants. The military had been leading the effort, while elected representatives were involved at a later stage when a parliamentary committee was given the green light to oversee the process.

Perhaps the thinking within the powers that be is that because the TTP and the clerics belong to the same school of thought, the militants may adopt a more flexible position while negotiating with the state. However, the experience with religiously motivated militants thus far both in Pakistan and abroad is that they have mostly ignored, or even opposed, the traditional ulema. Therefore, while the TTP may greet the scholars with reverence, there are no guarantees the militants will heed their advice. For example, the terrorist group's chief Noor Wali Mehsud said in a recent interview that the reversal of former Fata's merger with KP is a demand the group "cannot back down from". Moreover, the state can try other channels to reach out to the militants, but it is parliament that has to have the final say on the state of the peace process. And it should certainly not appear as if the state is trying to appease the militants. It needs to be asked if the TTP is even interested in making peace, particularly within the parameters of the Constitution. Or is the group simply buying time? After all, a UN report has said that the terrorist group has between 3,000 to 4,000 fighters in Afghanistan and poses "a greater threat in the region". The impression that Pakistan is bending over backwards to make peace with the TTP, while the latter rigidly sticks to its demands, must be dispelled. No armed group can be allowed to dictate what the state of Pakistan can and cannot do.

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Monkeypox outbreak

IT may seem right now to be a distant concern, but if the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that even diseases that might once have been considered isolated and limited to a few corners of the globe can spread very rapidly thanks to the increasing interconnectedness of world economies. The latest emergent health concern, a monkeypox outbreak, has now been upgraded to a 'global health emergency' by the World Health Organisation — the highest level of alert issued by the global public health body. The disease has been called that because it was first detected in a monkey. It is related to the smallpox

virus, a deadly disease, but monkeypox is considerably less severe. It has already infected close to 16,000 people in 72 different countries. The recent outbreak is said to have begun in Europe, with the WHO counting a rapid increase in the number of cases there in the month of May. By June, the number of infected people had shot up from 80 in the previous month to more than 1,000, with the disease being reported from 29 countries where it is not usually present. The numbers have since risen to 16,000 and 72 countries.

Thankfully, the strain of monkeypox currently circulating outside Africa is the milder of the two versions known to be in existence. Still, that does not mean we can afford to be complacent. Even 'mild' monkeypox is still quite painful to experience, and pregnant women, children and immune-compromised persons are especially at risk for serious complications. Given the congested living conditions in our urban areas, the risk of a major outbreak remains high in Pakistan. We must, therefore, put in place systems for early detection and quarantine, especially for travellers returning from countries where it has already been detected. The health ministry has called for enhanced vigilance, but that is not enough. There must be a national drive to educate people about the disease and also to practise better hygiene and cleanliness as a preventative measure.

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Calming words

AMID panic in the domestic capital markets, the acting State Bank governor has taken it upon himself to soothe nerves and calm angsty observers who feel the end may be nigh for the economy. Over the weekend, Dr Murtaza Syed forcefully dispelled some of the worst fears that have arisen about the health of the economy in similar statements made in response to questions put forth by Reuters and during a State Bank podcast.

The crux of both statements was, in Dr Syed's own words: "Pakistan is not as vulnerable as is being assumed." He was reacting to speculation that Pakistan may be headed towards an economic catastrophe due to runaway global inflation, which is exerting considerable pressure on the country's external account as well as its debt profile.

The ability of Pakistan's sputtering economy to cope with external pressures has recently been questioned, with fears multiplying in recent days due to the rupee's nearly 8pc slide against the dollar over the last trading week and the depletion of the country's forex reserves to below \$10bn even as inflation peaks to its highest in more than a decade.

Quite understandably, none of these are encouraging signs; especially not for an economy also roiled by political instability and that of late has witnessed one constitutional crisis after another. However, and this is what the State Bank acting governor would like us to remember, we do not seem to be in danger of an imminent default along the lines of what we've witnessed in our neighbourhood ie Sri Lanka.

The central bank chief has pointed out that Pakistan's public debt is structured in a way that it is mostly dependent on local sources to meet its financing needs; its external debt is quite low as a percentage of GDP compared to economies considered close to default; and that most of its external loans are on concessionary rather than commercial terms. Additionally, the State Bank chief has underlined that none of the countries that have defaulted or that face imminent default had a programme with the IMF in place, which Pakistan does.

Dr Syed also addressed fears raised by some quarters that Pakistan may not have sufficient money to pay off its near-term debt obligations, categorically stating that this was not so and that Pakistan had more than enough financing available to meet its obligations for the ongoing fiscal year.

It is unfortunate that the State Bank chief has been forced into firefighting mode while the continuing uncertainty on the political end makes markets even more jittery. Though Dr Syed's words themselves offer hope, they are also a recognition of the fact that any further uncertainty regarding the economy's health may quickly turn destructive. The government's economic managers must also step in and do their bit. They cannot remain missing in action for much longer.

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Climate devastation

SCIENTISTS had been warning us for decades that the environment has been changing for the worse, yet we hardly paid them any heed. However, as another

destructive monsoon season has now made clear, climate change cannot continue to be taken lightly and will need urgent policy-level interventions to counter the devastation changing weather patterns are leaving in their wake. Apocalyptic scenes from those places across Pakistan that saw unseasonably high rainfall this summer must serve as a wake-up call for both government policymakers as well as the executive, which is tasked with monitoring the execution of the government's policies on the ground. Continued neglect will come at the cost of economic losses and untold suffering, as we have seen this year, with the unabated loss of life and disruptions caused by destruction of civil infrastructure.

As soon as the season is over, both national and provincial governments will need to work in overdrive to restore communication linkages to places cut off due to flooding. However, not only must they attempt to fix the damage that has been done, they should also plan ahead so that next year and the years to come do not catch us unprepared. Climate scientists should be engaged to determine what lessons can be learnt from the changing weather patterns and how those can be used to prepare better for the future. Similarly, the country needs to tap its best civil engineers to design infrastructure that can both withstand and respond to the wild swings in weather patterns we seem to be experiencing with increasing frequency in recent years. Planting trees and other environmental interventions are a good step, but they are merely a band-aid on the damage already caused to the global environment by decades of unchecked industrialisation and reckless greed. It is time to adapt to new realities with solutions that are indigenous and present our best responses to the coming environmental challenges. This will be, in many ways, a fight for our survival and a matter of national security. It ought to be treated as such. Guns, tanks, bombs and bullets are unlikely to be of much help if environmental devastation ends up robbing us of basic necessities like food, shelter and water. The country needs to plan and prioritise its budget allocations in response to these emergent challenges. We may not be in a position to afford any further delay.

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Myanmar executions

AS the international community is confronted with multiple crises, primarily the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the global financial downturn, Myanmar has largely slipped off the radar. However, the recent execution of four pro-democracy activists by the military junta that has ruled the country since it overthrew the Aung San Suu Kyi-led hybrid regime last year, has once again brought Myanmar into the global discussion. Among the executed men was an ex-lawmaker belonging to Ms Suu Kyi's NLD party. The Myanmar regime claims the men committed "terror acts", including targeting civilians and security forces. However, according to reports, the men were convicted in closed-door trials that were unfair. Amnesty International says over 100 people have received death sentences after similar trials. The condemnation from the international community has been swift, with mostly the Western bloc denouncing the killings while regional grouping Asean, of which Myanmar is a member, has also criticised the executions.

This paper — which opposes capital punishment — has always argued that the only way to bring stability to Myanmar is for the country to return to democratic governance. Unfortunately, the ruling generals think otherwise, and the executions are a chilling reminder to pro-democracy elements, as well as the world community, that the junta does not plan to restore democracy. However, foreign powers, especially Myanmar's neighbours in Asean, must send a strong message to the military rulers that violence against civilians will not be tolerated, and that a time frame for the return of democracy must be finalised to avoid

Myanmar's international and regional isolation. If the junta sees that there are no repercussions after its violent tactics, it will only step up its repressive measures. Moreover, the international community must also press Myanmar to rehabilitate the Rohingya, hundreds of thousands of whom live in squalid camps in Bangladesh, or in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Those responsible for large-scale violence against the community must be brought to justice, while the Rohingya should be allowed to return to their homes and live in peace with fundamental rights guaranteed.

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False equivalence

CELEBRATING his party's triumph in dislodging the PML-N government in Punjab, former prime minister and PTI chairman Imran Khan on Wednesday made what sounded unmistakably like a speech delivered on the hustings, by a man confident of the ultimate prize.

He reiterated his demand for an early election as the only solution to the prevailing crises and vowed to continue public welfare schemes started by his government earlier. More significantly, he dilated upon the direction his policies would take in critical areas once he returned to power.

For instance, Mr Khan said he wanted good relations with all countries including the US, which he accuses of having engineered his government's ouster through a conspiracy, but exhorted the nation to choose "death over slavery".

In the same vein, the PTI supremo claimed he would make the country stand on its own feet and for financial assistance would appeal to overseas Pakistanis.

True to form, Mr Khan's statements were gossamer-thin on substance and heavy on populist narratives.

To point out but one fact, it was the PTI government that in 2019 had signed a bailout package with the IMF agreement and had no qualms about seeking financial support from other countries.

That said, it is accepted that populism has a tenuous relationship with facts. What cannot, however, be easily overlooked, or filed away as a 'rhetorical flourish', is Mr Khan's assertion in Wednesday's address that he can talk to the TTP or the Baloch separatists but not with "thieves", as he often describes the leadership of the major political parties other than PTI. "Will you speak to someone who robs your home?" he asked.

To place bloodthirsty militants who have murdered tens of thousands of innocent Pakistanis on par with political leaders, howsoever corrupt, is an abhorrent and cavalier overstatement. Such false equivalence ignores the gravity of the crime of terrorism which in many countries, including Pakistan, attracts the death penalty; even nations that have done away with capital punishment reserve the most severe sanctions for those convicted of terrorism.

That brings up another point, that of prosecutable evidence: political leaders found guilty of corruption should of course be punished. But despite having a compromised — and hence pliant — NAB chairman leading its ‘anti-corruption campaign’, why was the PTI during its nearly four years at the centre unable to successfully prosecute most of the political personalities it denounces as thieves?

Finally, Mr Khan’s stance makes it depressingly clear that personal animus, reinforced by obduracy, remains the driving force behind his politics. Even when the country is in the grip of a dire financial crisis and polarisation has risen to dangerous levels, the former PM — perhaps a future one too — insists on demonising his opponents when the only rational way forward is to cool down the political temperature and talk to those across the aisle.

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Surging deficit

PAKISTAN’S current account deficit has surged to \$17.4bn or 4.6pc the size of the economy during the last fiscal year on the rising trade deficit, in spite of multiple actions taken by the government and the central bank since the last quarter of 2021 to restrict imports. The growth in exports and remittances sent home by Pakistanis living abroad did somewhat help close the gap, but elevated international commodity and oil prices meant that the country would spend more on its energy and other imports. The higher prices and 33pc spike in imports from the petroleum group more than doubled the country’s oil import bill to \$2.9bn in June from \$1.4bn in May, the central bank said, and pushed up the month-on-month trade deficit by 27pc, despite a drop in non-oil imports. A surging current account deficit amid depleting dollar inflows from multilateral and bilateral lenders, as well as shrinking foreign investment have brought the foreign exchange reserves and rupee under enormous pressure over the last several months, stoked rapid inflation, forced the State Bank to boost borrowing costs to a multiyear high and eroded investor confidence in the economy.

Finance Minister Miftah Ismail recently said a policy plan would soon be in place. “Imports will go down gradually and exports will be up organically within three months,” he said without elaborating. The State Bank too is hopeful of the current account moderating from this month. The “... surge in oil imports saw the current

account gap rise to \$2.3bn in June despite higher exports and remittances. So far in July oil imports are much lower [due to the accumulation of record-high stocks] and the deficit is expected to resume its moderating trajectory,” the bank tweeted. With the IMF expected to release its funds soon, thus unlocking additional financing from other multilateral and bilateral creditors, Pakistan’s external sector may likely perk up in the short term. Yet, the deepening political turmoil is spawning doubts about the government’s ability to make tough decisions going forward and tackle the long-standing structural issues of the economy responsible for the recurring balance-of-payments crisis. Lately, global credit rating agencies like Fitch and Moody’s have also cited political risks to Pakistan’s ability to maintain a credible policy path. It will be unfortunate if the country digresses from the stabilisation path and fails to address structural impediments to exports and FDI because of the opportunistic politics being witnessed at the moment.

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Hepatitis awareness

UNWAVERING commitment to healthcare on the part of the highest government offices in the land is necessary to curb the spread of disease. Regrettably, for decades, the lack of such dedication has allowed even preventable diseases to fester. Among the illnesses devoid of government ownership are a variety of hepatitis cases. Take, for example, the fact that Pakistan has the second highest global burden of hepatitis C. Yet, only about 21pc are reportedly diagnosed, while between 13pc and 15pc receive treatment. The rest, according to health experts, are silent carriers of the hepatitis C virus — something that is also reflected in the high incidence of liver cancer patients in the country. Given the situation, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that hepatitis B and C, transmitted through blood-to-blood contact, together kill between 30,000 and 35,000 people every year in the country, with experts signalling a steady increase in the number of hepatitis C infections.

Though people are reluctant to get themselves screened, given the lack of government interest and deficiencies in the healthcare system, the larger share of the blame for the high prevalence of hepatitis cases rests squarely on the authorities’ shoulders. Clearly, treatment options and plans need to be developed

and made more accessible to the bulk of the population, with the active involvement of the basic or primary healthcare set-up. Around the world, hepatitis continues to be a big threat to public health, with more than a million deaths per year being caused by the hepatitis B and C infections alone. This is the reason why global health bodies, in connection with World Hepatitis Day that was observed yesterday, have also recommended bringing hepatitis care closer to the people, to encourage and increase the screening and treatment of silent infections that continue to be just as lethal, if not more, than the Covid-19 pandemic. It is time the authorities woke up from their slumber and worked towards plugging the many gaps in the country's healthcare sector.

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Supreme discontent

AFTER the Supreme Court walked itself into a political storm with its interpretation of Article 63-A and later its ruling on the July 22 Punjab chief minister election, there was bound to be increased scrutiny of its other activities. It was, therefore, no surprise that the Judicial Commission of Pakistan's meeting this week to discuss the elevation of five judges to the Supreme Court ended up inviting the attention that it did.

The meeting became controversial even before it took place, as lawyers, bar representatives and the senior puisne judge, Justice Qazi Faez Isa, objected to its timing because judges were on summer vacations. There were allegations that the scheduling of the meeting was an attempt to keep Justice Isa and the attorney general, who were both out of the country, away from the JCP proceedings. Both eventually joined via video link.

Embarrassingly for the top court, the JCP ended up opposing, by a majority of 5-4, four names proposed by Chief Justice Umar Bandial. The case of the fifth nominee, Peshawar High Court Chief Justice Rasheed Khan, was set aside for further consideration.

The division over the nominations was not unexpected: it reflects a long-running dispute over what criteria may be used to elevate judges.

Traditionally, the criterion had been the 'principle of seniority' — ie the senior-most judges were automatically considered first in line for elevation. However,

the apex court has in recent years argued for a ‘merit-based’ order of promotion, arguing that seniority itself is not enough guarantee of a judge’s fitness for elevation.

While merit-based criteria are acceptable to many, others oppose rushing into the change because no objective standard has been set against which a judge’s qualification may be reviewed. The argument is that since it is solely the chief justice’s prerogative to make nominations, it can be difficult, in the absence of formal guidelines, to determine if a nominee is actually competent or if they have been named in keeping with personal preferences. Therefore, till such time that formal criteria are laid down, the chief justice has been urged to stick to the principle of seniority as it retains an element of objectivity.

The result of the JCP vote reinforced that long-running demand.

It is discouraging to see the superior judiciary seemingly divided at a time when Pakistan is in great social and political flux. It is important that the chief justice dispel the criticism he is facing by addressing its root causes.

As head of the Supreme Court, he must protect its image as an independent, neutral arbiter in matters of national concern — an image that increasingly seems at risk considering the fractures becoming apparent in its edifice and the attacks it is facing from without. He can begin by reviewing those decisions that have put his house in disorder: justice, after all, must begin at home.

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Post-rain clean-up

AS the nation reels in the aftermath of a heavy monsoon spell, a number of key areas need the authorities’ immediate attention. Apart from rescuing marooned residents, the state needs to ensure that there is proper sanitation in the post-rain situation, while battered infrastructure and communication links need to be rebuilt on an emergency basis.

Looking at the unsightly conditions in Karachi, there is genuine concern that unless immediate action is taken, stagnant rainwater and sewage will create major health hazards. In particular, foetid water heightens the risk of gastrointestinal diseases, as well as vector-borne ailments. Therefore, in both the

rural and urban areas affected by heavy rainfall, there is a pressing need to drain rainwater and clean up the stinking pools of sewage.

Moreover, the state of roads and bridges — especially in Balochistan and Sindh — is extremely worrisome. Three key bridges and a part of the National Highway were swept away in Balochistan, while Karachi's potholed, cratered roads present a clear and present danger to motorcyclists and car drivers, causing long traffic jams and creating death traps, especially at night. In Sindh alone, as per the figures quoted by the provincial chief minister, 388km of roads have been damaged. The prime minister has also constituted a committee to assess the damage caused by the rains, and it is hoped this body carries out a thorough survey and starts repair and rehabilitation work without delay.

Looking beyond immediate firefighting measures, the state needs to build infrastructure that can tackle extreme weather. Most experts are of the view that extreme weather events, particularly heavy rains and floods, will now become a regular feature and the state can ill afford to ignore the impact natural disasters have on infrastructure. In many of our cities, particularly Karachi, even moderate rainfall creates potholes on the road surface, while in some cases arteries are reduced to mud tracks. This shows that those building and maintaining these roads have either been negligent or, worse, have knowingly used inferior material in construction.

As it has been stated before in these columns, urban infrastructure throughout Pakistan — roads, drainage, public spaces — needs to be overhauled to make it climate-resilient. Of course, the rulers, preoccupied with palace intrigues, have little time to focus on such key areas that affect the people. However, unless we plan for the future, we will be doomed to repeat this cycle of misery and destruction year after year.

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Test defeat

IT was a case of speaking too soon. With his side still 419 runs away from an improbable victory target of 508 in the second Test against Sri Lanka, Pakistan's batting coach Mohammad Yousuf claimed his players were feeling no pressure. Yousuf was drawing on the fact that his side, riding on a sensational 160 not out

by opener Abdullah Shafique, had chased a record target of 342 at the same Galle International Stadium in the first Test. The challenge facing Pakistan in the second Test, though, was monumental. The highest successful fourth innings chase in Test cricket is 418 by the West Indies against Australia in 2003. Pakistan needed to better that on the final day of the Test to win or bat out at least three sessions to draw the match and win the series. For all the talk of no pressure, once it came, Pakistan wilted. Skipper Babar Azam admitted after Sri Lanka's series-levelling, 246-run victory that Pakistan batters fell to soft dismissals. The loss means Pakistan have now failed to win their last two Test series, having lost to Australia earlier and slipped to fifth place in the World Test Championship standings.

Thankfully, the players aren't yet out of the running for a top-two finish in the race to play the World Test Championship final. However, the team needs to improve for the home Test series against England and New Zealand later this year. There are some positive takeaways from the series, with Abdullah proving his world class talent and forming a strong opening pair with Imam-ul-Haq. Babar, meanwhile, continues to pile on the runs while all-rounder Mohammad Nawaz came good in the first game. Teenager Naseem Shah was impressive, adding to Pakistan's pace battery led by Shaheen Shah Afridi — who was sorely missed in the second Test. However, Pakistan's middle order showed fragility with Azhar Ali struggling in the first Test and Fawad Alam, his replacement in the second, failing to play an anchor role. The team management must work on addressing these shortcomings.

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The PTI XI

A BIZARRE spectacle is playing out within the hallowed halls of parliament. On Thursday, the National Assembly Speaker accepted the resignations of 11 PTI lawmakers, and the MNAs were subsequently de-notified by the ECP. The PTI lawmakers had submitted their resignations in April after the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan had succeeded. However, the acceptance of the resignations raises a number of key questions. Namely, why did the Speaker choose to accept the resignations of these 11 MNAs, and what will be the fate of the rest of the over 100 lawmakers of the former ruling party? The Speaker

should at least explain why he chose to accept these particular resignations. PTI leaders have been up in arms, calling the move “political” and “unconstitutional”. Even by the byzantine standards of Pakistani politics, these developments are quite odd.

So what will be the game plan for both sides from here on? There are some media reports that say another batch of PTI lawmakers will have their resignations accepted in the coming days. The Speaker had earlier asked the PTI MNAs to confirm in person their decision to resign. Yet, reportedly none of the parliamentarians showed up. One view is that the PML-N does not feel threatened by any possible defections amongst its less ‘committed’ allies in the House and has started the process of accepting the PTI’s resignations in a piecemeal fashion. But, the directly elected seats that have been vacated, and any future seats to be de-notified, will have to be filled via by-elections. Here the PTI is confronted with another dilemma. Will Imran Khan’s party field candidates, just as it did in the case of the Punjab Assembly by-elections? If the PTI does contest the by-polls and manages to get its candidates elected to the National Assembly, will they attend parliament sessions, stay away, or submit their resignations again? Clearly, the political calculus is of a very convoluted sort, as both sides seem to be playing mind games with each other. Moreover, Mr Khan has said he wants nothing short of fresh general elections, but by-polls on over 100 seats would effectively spell a mini-election. In a saner world, both the government and opposition would have sat together to sort out such a parliamentary dilemma in a democratic fashion. But in today’s much polarised Pakistan, where politics has turned into a farce, progressive thinking is not to be expected from any of the protagonists.

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Funding disclosures

THE PTI’s foreign funding headache is back to haunt it. Journalist Simon Clark, who also authored *The Key Man*, a book that uncovered the allegedly illicit dealings of beleaguered business tycoon Arif Naqvi, has recently published in the *Financial Times* an account of how funds collected from foreign companies and individuals through charity cricket matches were eventually funnelled to the PTI under the Abraaj chief’s watchful eye.

Mr Naqvi, once a widely respected head of a multibillion-dollar Dubai-based private equity firm, is said to have organised a highly exclusive cricket T20 tournament on his private estate in Wootton, England, over 2010-12, in which he invited the world's powerful and wealthy to take part. The participants were reportedly told that the thousands of pounds in fees they would pay to participate or any other contributions they made would be diverted to 'philanthropic' causes.

However, as Mr Clark's investigation revealed, millions of dollars collected through the fundraising tournament by Wootton Cricket Ltd, a Cayman Islands company owned and operated by Mr Naqvi, were later transferred through intermediaries to the PTI.

The problem is not that a wealthy man of Pakistani origin used his money and influence to do a favour for a friend. Neither Mr Naqvi nor former prime minister Imran Khan has ever denied their friendship or that the former helped the PTI in fundraising internationally. However, the FT report establishes that some major donors to Mr Naqvi's personal cricket league were, in fact, foreign nationals or entities who are, by law, prohibited from providing any funding to Pakistani political parties.

The revelation has renewed calls for the ECP to issue its judgement on the long-running foreign funding case against the PTI, with the government coalition — still smarting from its losses in Punjab — the loudest in demanding that the ECP provide some closure in this long overdue matter.

Meanwhile, the PTI continues to deny any wrongdoing, insisting that there was nothing underhanded or illegal about the way it raised money and that it has provided unprecedented access to the ECP to scrutinise its accounts. It also continues to insist that all other political parties should be investigated for foreign funding and that the PTI alone should not be singled out.

While a court of law alone can establish how complicit the PTI was in the decisions taken by Mr Naqvi in this case, it bears noting that none of the disclosures made over the past seven months or so about PTI's fundraising efforts in its early years paint a reassuring picture about the party's regard for the rules. The party may not be wrong when it says it didn't do anything other parties don't do, but that cannot absolve it if it did indeed break the law. It is time for this matter to be settled so that the political process can move on. Continuing uncertainty will not help anyone.

‘Playing with fire’

THOSE hoping that Thursday’s over two-hour-long phone call between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping would help cool things off between the US and China would be disappointed. If anything, the uncomfortable conversation has only reiterated the belief that the world’s two top economies may inadvertently walk into a conflict over Taiwan. For the international community, particularly the Global South, this would be a disastrous development that would do more damage to the world’s economy, which is already experiencing severe pain due to the Russia-Ukraine war. With reference to Taiwan, Mr Xi told the American leader that “those who play with fire will eventually get burned”. There was little nuance behind the message. While bilateral ties over Taiwan have been steadily deteriorating during the past few months, a planned visit to the island, which China considers part of its territory, by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is being seen by Beijing as a provocation. Lower-ranking American officials and lawmakers do visit Taiwan, but Ms Pelosi’s proposed trip would be the first of a top-tier US office-holder since 1997.

If America seeks to continue its policy of ‘strategic ambiguity’ and still adheres to the ‘One China’ policy, then it would be best for Ms Pelosi to put off her visit. There would be no major positive outcome and the trip would inflame China and potentially spark a conflict. The CIA chief recently told a conference that it was not a question of ‘if’ China would retake Taiwan by force, “but how and when they would do it”. In an ideal world, China would have resolved the Taiwan question peacefully. However, if Beijing is planning otherwise, it would be ill-advised for Washington to start a conflict over the island. The rhetoric between China and the US very much mirrors the nasty exchanges that took place between Russia and the West before the Ukraine war. It is hoped that the Taiwan dispute does not lead to a similar showdown between China and the US in Asia.

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