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Editorials for the Month of April 2020

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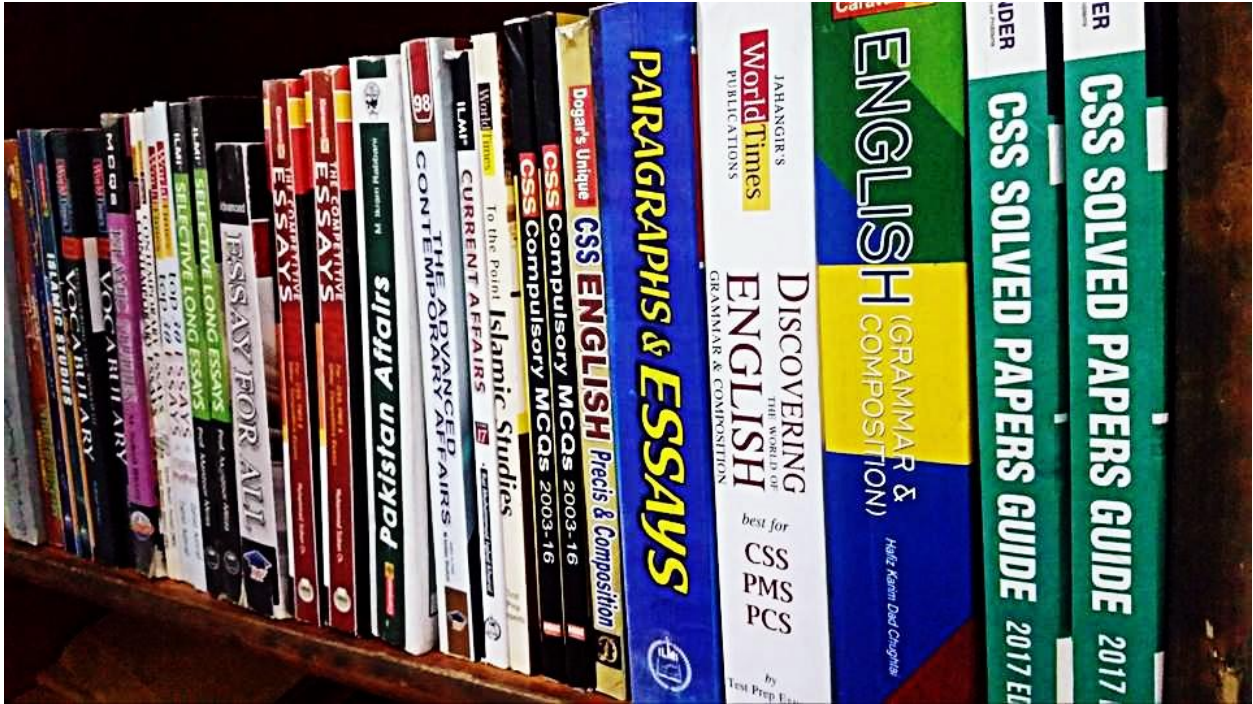
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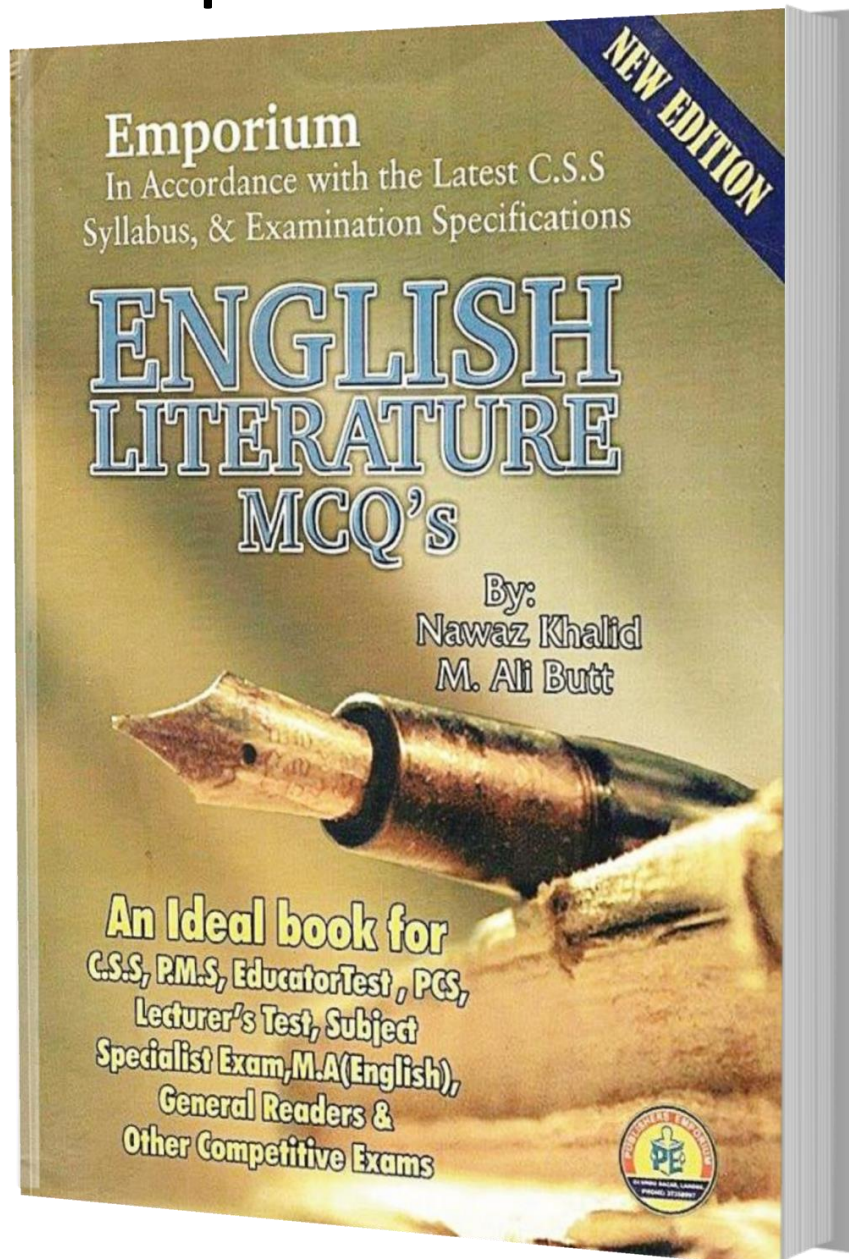
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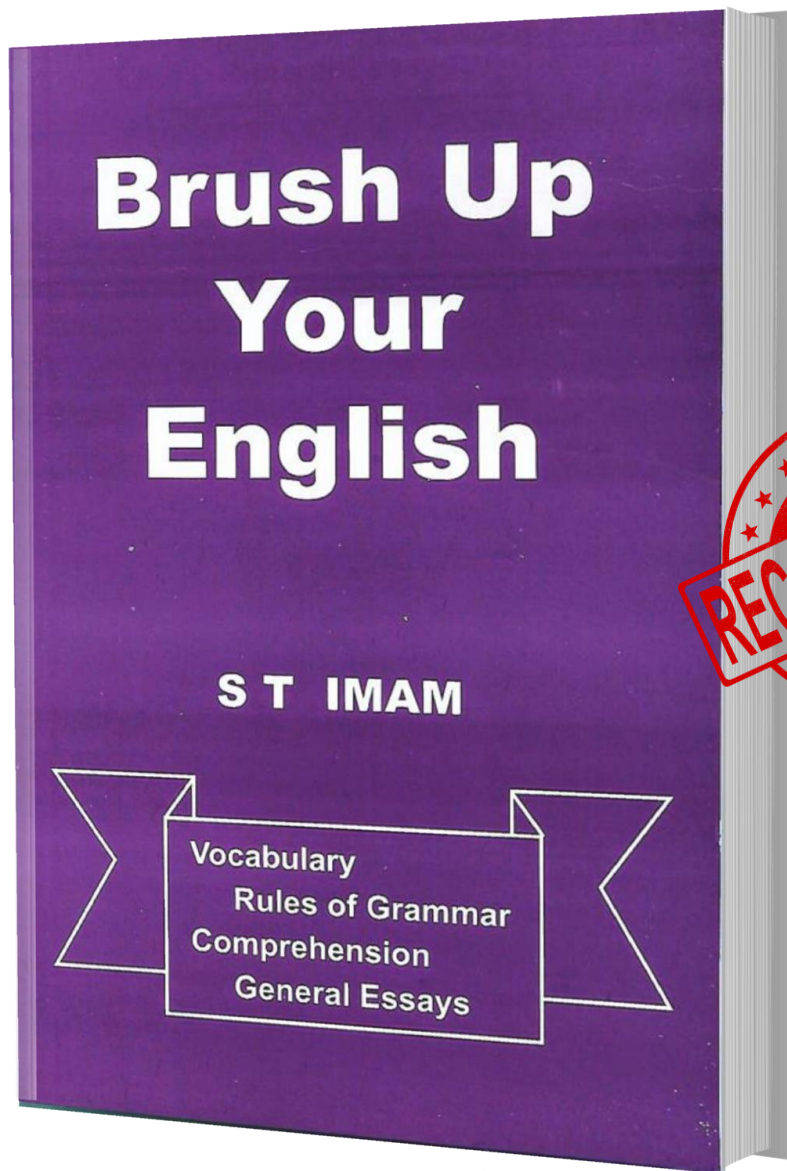


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Need for ceasefire

AS the coronavirus pandemic continues its deadly march across the planet, acts of violence perpetrated by different groups continue apace in parts of the Muslim world, seemingly disregarding the threat Covid-19 poses to humanity. On Sunday, Somali militant group Al Shabaab — linked to Al Qaeda — killed a senior official in the Puntland region. The outfit has been held responsible for far deadlier terrorist attacks in the past and seeks to overthrow the government in Mogadishu. Meanwhile in Afghanistan, the government said on Monday that the Afghan Taliban carried out two deadly attacks targeting police and army personnel. Dozens were reported killed in the attacks. On the other hand, jets belonging to the Saudi-led coalition pounded the Yemeni capital Sana'a as well as a northern province on Monday after the Houthi rebel movement fired missiles targeting the kingdom's cities over the weekend. The situation in Syria also remains precarious, though there have been no major acts of violence over the past few days.

Of course, even before the Covid-19 crisis erupted, the situation in these global hotspots was far from perfect. Because of conflicts involving a variety of actors — states, armed groups, terrorist outfits — hundreds of thousands had been killed or maimed, while millions had been uprooted or were suffering from malnutrition and disease. In this miserable state of affairs, the coronavirus threatens to cause havoc on a catastrophic scale unless wiser counsel prevails. Ideally, as the UN secretary general has said, there needs to be a global ceasefire to ensure all energies are concentrated on containing the virus. Perhaps leading Islamic scholars of all sects can give a joint call to ask combatants in all these theatres to lay down their arms and help save lives at risk from Covid-19. However, the fact is that while such a call may have an effect on the Houthis and the Taliban, which have political wings and are Islamist nationalists, the words of ulema and scholars will most likely be dismissed by terrorists belonging to groups such as Al Qaeda and the self-styled Islamic State group.

Perhaps the focus of the Islamic bloc should be to put in place long-lasting ceasefires in countries such as Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan in the wake of the coronavirus threat. In all three theatres, embryonic peace processes exist; these must be given a strong push by the international community, specifically the Islamic nations, in such times of global crisis. In Yemen, for example, if the

Saudis were to declare a unilateral ceasefire, international pressure would be on the Houthis to respond and devote all energies to letting help get through to Yemen's vulnerable people. In Afghanistan, the peace process suffers from fits and starts, but leading Islamic states can convince both the government in Kabul as well as the Taliban to cease hostilities and fight Covid-19.

Relief force

URGENCY is the need of the hour. To fight a pandemic that is spreading like wildfire and to mitigate its impact on their citizens, governments need to fashion responses that make the best use of precious time and resources. Raising a youth volunteer force called the Corona Relief Tigers, a measure formally announced by Prime Minister Imran Khan in his address to the nation on Monday, cannot be described as meeting that criteria. Moreover, while the premier may have the best of intentions, the move also sends the wrong message to an opposition that feels alienated by the PTI government. Indeed, the PPP has already expressed its reservations, with Senator Raza Rabbani saying in a statement that the move would politicise the national effort against Covid-19. He suggested that the centre take a leaf out of the Sindh government's book and form mohalla committees including members of different political parties and NGOs working in the areas where relief goods are required to be distributed.

Providing relief during a pandemic through mass distribution points is a difficult task as Sindh is discovering, with hundreds converging on the sites despite the authorities' best efforts. Mr Rabbani's advice to the centre is eminently practical. On-the-ground resources such as community organisations can be quickly harnessed in the relief effort. For the federal government to now reinvent the wheel — albeit with a more catchy name — will take up unnecessary time and effort. As it is, there is little clarity about how it can organise such a massive operation from the top down. Mohalla committees are a more granular mechanism that would have the local buy-in critical to countering accusations of favouritism and ensure a more systematic distribution procedure. That said, our society has been ill served by a succession of democratic governments that have balked at devolving power to the grass-roots level. The coronavirus pandemic, in a few terrible weeks, has highlighted the importance of such third-tier governance. Local elected bodies, empowered and properly funded, would have

been the logical conduit for not only the relief effort but also for carrying out awareness campaigns to prevent the spread of infection. Instead, there are no local governments in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan at present. Meanwhile in Sindh, the PPP through legislative action has abridged and diluted third-tier governance to meaningless tokenism. One can only hope this unprecedented emergency will herald a change in approach.

Education lockdown

“ROTI, kapra, makaan — aur internet,” is how former Google executive Tania Aidrus underscored her vision for Digital Pakistan: a tech-driven society in which all citizens are connected. However, it will take many years for that dream to become a reality. The internet continues to remain a luxury accessible to a relatively small percentage of the total population, with even fewer able to access good-quality connections, particularly in the periphery regions of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and former Fata as well as Balochistan. According to a report in this paper, in recent weeks, hundreds of university students and instructors have registered complaints regarding the problems they have had with internet connectivity, along with other technical issues, during their online classes. Others criticised the quality of lectures, which they felt were deteriorating, with less interaction and fewer chances to ask questions. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, with much of the country under lockdown, the online teaching system — particularly in use in developed parts of the world — has been encouraged by the authorities here. But it is also presenting its own sets of challenges and difficulties, and is exposing and creating inequalities which will be felt beyond the classroom.

Of course, no one could have foreseen the pandemic, and both students and teachers are trying their best to do what they can under difficult circumstances, but authorities will need to chalk out a long-term plan if the current situation continues beyond the summer months. Otherwise, the health emergency may just turn into an education emergency, which will bring its own host of problems, from a higher number of early marriages to more children working to support their families. Pakistan already has a high dropout rate from both primary and secondary schools, while millions of others have never even stepped inside a classroom. Prolonged breaks and disruptions in education may lead to even

more dropouts. And how many Pakistanis can even afford to make it to higher education in the first place?

Limiting the spread

WHERE containment of the spread of Covid-19 is concerned, it is essential that decisions at the top are taken with prudence and firmness. Any dithering or lack of direction can result in the situation getting out of control with an explosion of cases. Considering our creaking healthcare system, this is not a risk Pakistan can afford to take. Where mismanagement of the crisis is concerned, mistakes were quite obviously made while handling the zaireen returning from Iran, which has been ravaged by the virus. The pilgrims were housed in inadequate conditions in Taftan, and the lack of proper facilities to screen and accommodate them is said to have led to the spread of the contagion in this country. However, another major administrative lapse that has affected the battle against Covid-19 has been the Punjab government's handling of the Tableeghi Jamaat's grand ijtimia in Raiwind held in the middle of March, when coronavirus cases had already been reported in Pakistan.

The Tableeghi Jamaat's ijtimia is no small event. Figures in the media say around 250,000 people had gathered in Raiwind. At a time when 'social distancing' and 'lockdowns' are buzzwords in the effort to stop the spread of the contagion, the congregation was a recipe for disaster. The Punjab government had asked the Tableeghi Jamaat to postpone the event, but the request was ignored. It took heavy showers in the area for the Jamaat's hierarchy to cancel the event after it had begun, but by then the damage had already been done. While the Punjab administration erred by allowing the event to go ahead in the first place, things were further complicated when Tableeghi preachers were allowed to spread throughout the country. Cases connected to its members have been reported across Pakistan, as well as other parts of the world. In fact, it is believed that Covid-19 was carried to Gaza by two preachers who had been to Raiwind.

There are lessons that can be learnt from this fiasco. Firstly, where matters of public health are concerned, the state must be gentle but firm. The Punjab government should have clearly communicated to the Tableeghi leadership that letting the ijtimia go ahead would create a health crisis on a national scale. Bringing in senior clerics to communicate the message may have helped.

Secondly, what the state needs to do now is limit all religious congregations, particularly those of Friday prayers. Scholars of all sects have backed the call for a suspension on congregational prayers, and even the Grand Mosque in Makkah — Islam's holiest site — has been put off limits to believers. Therefore, overzealous clerics must not be allowed to challenge the writ of the state, and the Covid-19 crisis should be prevented from snowballing further; the ban on congregational prayers must be enforced by the centre as well as all provincial administrations as long as the crisis lasts.

Informal enterprises

THE country's informal sector has always kept the wheels of the economy moving during every financial crisis we have ever witnessed in the past by supporting growth and protecting jobs. No more. The ongoing economic crisis triggered by the global coronavirus pandemic threatens to damage the informal sector the most, putting out of work those who need to labour every day to meet their daily needs. By the time the lockdowns enforced by the provincial governments as part of the social-distancing measures to limit the spread of the infection are lifted, millions of informal jobs would be lost and tens of hundreds of small, informal businesses destroyed — perhaps for good. It is in view of this looming economic impact of the coronavirus crisis that the government has announced economic relief packages to support the most affected segments of society in order to minimise the damage to businesses and jobs. The relief programmes so far announced aim to directly transfer cash to 12.5m poor households and distribute food hampers among them. Similarly, the government has announced funds to support businesses and deferred interest payments, in addition to several concessions announced by the State Bank, to help the enterprises facing cash-flow problems make it through the crisis.

Nevertheless, none of these packages contain anything significant to help the informal sector, which is estimated by the World Bank to be a little more than one-third of the country's GDP and accounts for over 60pc of the total workforce and 71.3pc of non-agriculture labour. The informal businesses are not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks. Similarly, the workers employed in the informal sector work mostly on daily wages and are typically not covered under any social protection scheme. According to the ILO, these people are in the bottom or lower middle-income segment of the

population. The pandemic is exacerbating existing economic inequalities as the poor and vulnerable segments of society are struggling to cope with the economic consequences of the virus. The policy response to the coronavirus threat must focus on the most vulnerable people and enterprises. The government should ensure that its financial support reaches the enterprises that need it most — that is micro and small businesses operating in the informal sector — to protect jobs. The economy will suffer massively if micro and small informal enterprises go out of business and their workers lose their jobs. That could potentially lead to massive social unrest in the country.

Policing the pandemic

LIKE much of the world, Pakistan is suffering from the weight of the coronavirus pandemic, and no one seems to know just how long the global health crisis will persist. Understandably, there is fear and anxiety over the rapid spread of the virus, its strain on an already burdened healthcare system, and its overreaching effects on the economy, education, and even simple human interaction — the latter is perhaps most deeply felt under the lockdowns. Meanwhile, law enforcement has to grapple with enforcing lockdown measures, while simultaneously keeping themselves protected from catching the illness. It is only natural that the present circumstances will deeply impact the mental and emotional well-being of both citizens and the state apparatus. However, this should not excuse words or displays of cruelty, particularly towards those who may be suffering from illness, nor should health concerns be used to perpetuate xenophobia, racism, or the targeting of any one community or sect. Equally important, the privacy of patients must be maintained, something that was lacking in the initial days.

Recently, the health ministry mentioned that some coronavirus patients had complained about ill treatment at the hands of district administrations and the police, saying they were being treated like criminals. The ministry was correct to warn against harsh behaviour or shaming tactics, since it can lead to fewer people reporting their illness, thus making it more difficult to contain the spread of the virus. Of course, this does not apply to all police officers or authority figures, and many officers enforce the law with remarkable patience, bravery and selfless service, evident in many videos being shared on social media. Last month, UN Secretary General António Guterres also addressed the issue of stigmatisation in

a video message, calling for greater empathy and global solidarity in the face of the epidemic, and urging member nations to “be kind, and make sure no one faces stigma”. The virus does not discriminate, and patients deserve urgent care, not condemnation.

Bridging the gap

THE National Coordination Committee, led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, has taken the correct decision to extend by two weeks the countrywide restrictions that were put in place to slow down the spread of the coronavirus. The meeting also decided that PIA would operate special flights to bring back nearly 2,000 Pakistanis from different countries. These decisions reflect the federal government’s acknowledgement that the spread of the virus can only be slowed by aggressively pursuing social distancing and enforcing all actions that promote the latter. However, there is still much that requires greater clarity.

Certain policy pronouncements by the federal government, for instance, are sending signals that run counter to the umbrella policy of keeping people away from each other and confined to their homes as much as possible. The formation of the volunteer force named Corona Relief Tigers is one such step. At a time when speed is of the essence and when protecting people from getting infected or infecting others is a priority, one may question the wisdom of sending a large number of people out in the field to contact those in their homes. Such action — however well-intentioned — could expose the volunteers to the virus. In addition, there is the issue of how much time, effort and resources would be required to get this ‘force’ ready to go out and deliver the services, rations and information to people who need it most. The state already has in place various mechanisms through which such service delivery can be provided. The federal government has yet to provide satisfactory answers to these concerns. In the same vein, providing a financial package to boost the construction industry is a good step but will it not dilute the larger policy of keeping people away from each other during the pandemic? Construction employs dozens of industries which will all need to open up in order to kick-start the sector thereby bringing people out in the open. Here too the government has to come up with a convincing explanation.

These schemes may be diverting the government's attention from where it really needs to be focused. There still exists a worrying gap between the centre and the provinces in terms of initiating policies that complement, and not contradict, each other. The federal government has to respect the provinces' autonomy provided by the 18th Amendment but it cannot abdicate its role of giving national direction and providing leadership through cohesion and coordination. The federal government must act as the cement that binds the provinces in a national goal through a common outlook buttressed by vision, motivation and resources. The federal government should not be competing with the provinces but complementing their efforts and lending a hand wherever needed. It might be better for Islamabad to focus on such areas instead of policies that raise more questions than answers.

Bailing out industry

QUITE rapidly, pressure is mounting on the government to do more for trade and industry through the lockdowns since the losses are mounting with each passing day. Some of those who have to run their payrolls for the month of March are not sure if they will be able to do the same for the month of April. So if the lockdowns continue, the ranks of those in severe hardship will only increase. With this in mind, as well as other concerns such as export orders that are ready or nearly ready for shipment but cannot move to the port due to the lockdown, the industrial leaders of this country gathered together and met the finance team on Wednesday. The traders are separately announcing their own gatherings to mount pressure for a relaxation on the lockdowns. This pressure will increase rapidly from here on for the government to either announce a relief package for trade and industry or ease the lockdowns as each day brings more losses.

The problem for the government is that lockdowns cannot be eased while the rate of the Covid-19 infection is still rising. Doing so would be catastrophic since the infection would return with a vengeance, forcing even more stringent lockdowns in the immediate aftermath. The best way forward would be to build a mechanism that allows government assistance to flow directly to the workers of the enterprises, thus relieving the traders and owners from the burden of payroll expenses. This way the government could partner with business to help develop a database of beneficiaries for the targeted assistance they are preparing to release. Building this mechanism has its own set of challenges, but the

government should not put public resources at the disposal of trade and industry owners in the name of helping the workers. Keeping the payrolls running through the lockdowns is the collective responsibility of the government and private sector, and they can partner with each other in the effort. But government funds must not be used to bail out private capital, at least not at this stage. The priority must remain targeted assistance for the poor and unemployed, and building the database as well as the mechanism with which to target the assistance directly to them. The time has come for business leaders to realise that the more data they can share with the government about their payrolls, the greater the support they become eligible for.

IHK domicile law

WHILE the world is preoccupied with battling the Covid-19 contagion, elements within the Indian establishment, unfortunately, are still busy stirring up mischief in India-held Kashmir.

As reported in this paper on Thursday, India has passed new domicile rules for IHK which, in effect, guarantee a massive demographic shift in the region, and are a grim follow-up to last year's scrapping of the disputed region's autonomous status. As per available details, anyone who has resided in IHK for 15 years or has studied there for a specific period of time is eligible to call occupied Kashmir his or her place of domicile.

Kashmiri activists have rightly called the move a sinister attempt to change the demographic profile of the disputed area. They say the new law will allow those from outside the region to snap up jobs and benefits that should be primarily available to Kashmiris. Even Omar Abdullah, a loyalist former chief minister of IHK, who was recently released from detention by New Delhi, has heaped criticism on India for making the move at this time. "Talk about suspect timing... the government slips in a new domicile law for J&K," he has said.

It is highly condemnable that during a raging global health crisis the Indian state has sought to ignite a new controversy in IHK. While the held region has been under lockdown for over a year, now India itself — along with large swathes of the world — is also under a lengthy self-imposed closure to keep the coronavirus at bay.

These times call for humanitarian measures and firm policy to protect people's lives and health. This is no time for sly political games, but it appears those who matter in New Delhi are unmoved by such facts. India should not add to the Kashmiri peoples' miseries and, instead of this bureaucratic subterfuge, it should adopt a conciliatory policy towards the disputed region that aims to settle this decades-old dispute peacefully, and as per the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Drap delay

IT is distressing to learn that the country's lead regulator for the pharmaceutical sector, the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan, was largely dysfunctional between Feb 25 and March 31 when the fight against Covid-19 had begun in earnest. During that period, 10 critical appointments were pending, and since these were posts where all important decisions are made, the authority was unable to respond to any requests from the pharmaceutical sector, whether on pricing or permission to introduce new drugs or approve basic things necessary for the fight against the coronavirus such as hand sanitisers. The result is that a large number of players have entered the hand sanitiser market, and the majority of what they are selling are substandard products that would be ineffective against the virus since a test conducted by the Pakistan Standard and Quality Control Authority shows they have alcohol content below 60pc, which is the minimum required threshold for effectiveness against the virus.

In addition, manufacturers have not been able to place orders for many medicines that may be essential for the fight, such as chloroquine, because crucial price adjustments are required before orders for raw material can be placed due to large fluctuations in the global markets. Since nobody had been appointed to the posts where such price adjustments are usually discussed, the manufacturers emptied their stock without placing new orders while they waited for the position to be filled. As it turns out, Drap filled those positions in a hurry on the evening of March 31 once the media queries began to come in. This action demonstrated that the delay had been entirely unnecessary and the positions need not have been vacant all this time. This is nothing short of a travesty. Our front-line professionals in the health sector are making enormous sacrifices in this fight and it is surely distressing for them to learn of the level of ineptitude that rendered the lead drug regulator dysfunctional at a crucial time.

Verdict in Daniel Pearl case

As a result, one of the most dangerous and wily militants the world has yet seen may soon walk free.

Citing lack of evidence, the appellate bench overturned the death penalty handed down in 2002 to Omar Saeed Sheikh as the main accused in the Daniel Pearl case.

However, while acquitting him and three co-accused on the charges of murder and kidnapping for ransom, it found Sheikh guilty of abducting the American journalist and sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment.

Given the 18 years he has already spent in jail, he could be released within days.

Pearl's abduction and beheading in January 2002, a few months after 9/11, is a grisly signpost in the history of militancy in Pakistan.

It catapulted local terrorist networks into the global 'war on terror', and not only because of the victim's nationality: the operation that culminated in Pearl's murder was an early example of the nexus between homegrown extremists and Al Qaeda, the foremost international terrorist outfit at the time.

Moreover, his death marked the beginning of an open season on journalists reporting on militancy.

The conviction of at least some of the perpetrators in the Daniel Pearl case was a rare exception to that impunity — until now.

Suffice it to say, there were many reasons for police and intelligence agencies to build a watertight case against the individuals involved — 27, according to details unearthed by two international, highly regarded investigative journalism bodies.

As it turned out, only four, including Sheikh, were eventually charged and convicted.

Some were killed in 'police encounters' while others remained free.

Over the course of nearly two decades, several names surfaced as being part of the conspiracy — among them the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

Yet the prosecution went nowhere, seemingly suspended between inaction and confusion — if not worse.

The appeal hearings brought to light a shamefully flawed investigation including forced confessions and possible evidence tampering.

Such malpractices are nothing out of the ordinary here, except in this instance Pakistan's reputation for acting against militancy is at stake.

The man on the verge of achieving his freedom has time and again demonstrated an implacable determination to act on his extremist convictions.

Aside from the Daniel Pearl case, Sheikh is also suspected of having played a role in planning one of the assassination attempts against Gen Musharraf.

Indeed, so cunning and resourceful is he that even from behind bars, he attempted to heighten Pakistan-India tensions in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks by making hoax calls to Pakistan's then president and chief of army staff.

One million mark

MORE than a million cases of the novel coronavirus have been reported across the world, and over 55,000 deaths, a staggering figure that is expected to only rise in the coming days. Even when the immediate crisis is over — sooner rather than later, one can only hope — and some semblance of 'normalcy' returns to public life, the questions raised in its wake and the weaknesses exposed with regard to our systems of governance and economy will remain. In any case, history will judge how the world's leadership responded to the global health emergency when it stared them in the face. Did they face the crisis head on, make difficult decisions in time? Or did they falter, bury their heads in the sand, and grow paralysed with indecision? While China has been able to contain the spread of the virus through strict measures, quickly building quarantine facilities and extending the lockdown for millions of its citizens — and is now generously assisting other countries with its expertise and medical supplies — its initial suppression of a young doctor who raised alarm about a new 'SARS-like' illness led to the situation quickly spiralling out of control in the first place. But from being the initial epicentre of Covid-19, China now accounts for a mere 8pc of all global cases, while Italy and Spain have registered 11pc of the total number of all cases each, sharing approximately 30,000 deaths between them. Despite so

much death and sickness witnessed by some of the strongest healthcare systems of Europe, the two countries believe the situation may now be stabilising.

In contrast, the US has now surpassed all other countries with the highest number of Covid-19 cases, accounting for a massive 22pc of the global tally and double that of Italy and Spain. President Donald Trump's response is a textbook example of what not to do in the face of a health emergency, beginning with the dismissal of the government's pandemic response team in 2018, which was established by his predecessor, Barack Obama, in response to the Ebola outbreak. Besides the immediate threat the virus presents to lives and livelihoods, and its burden on healthcare infrastructures and workers, the extended lockdowns threaten starvation and food riots, already being witnessed in some countries such as Lebanon. Every tragedy presents an opportunity to learn and grow — but only if we care to pay attention to the distress signals inflicting the body politic.

Ill-conceived policy

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has announced a major list of incentives for the construction industry aimed at boosting the economy at a time when the adverse impact of the coronavirus is wreaking havoc across all sectors. The prime minister vowed to open allied industries to strike a balance between economic activities and efforts to contain the pandemic. On the face of it, the logic of incentivising the construction industry is a sound one. It will spur activity across a wide spectrum of sectors, attract investment, generate jobs and provide economic sustenance to those who need it most. The prime minister has been speaking of the benefits of a growing construction industry, and the government's Naya Pakistan Housing Programme is also aimed at producing such a beneficial effect for the economy. Yet there is a problem.

The announcement is fraught with risks. At a time when the entire world is prioritising lockdowns so that people can stay indoors and away from each other in order to suppress the spread of the coronavirus, the prime minister's policy will have the opposite effect. By incentivising the construction industry and encouraging it to start its activity, the government is getting people out to work. It is not just a question of those who will be working at construction sites but also

all those citizens who work in allied industries who will now be forced back to work. In essence then, the federal government is diluting the concept of a lockdown and asking thousands of Pakistanis to run the risk of either getting infected with the virus or infecting others. This is not just bad policy, it is outright dangerous.

Similarly, giving tax breaks to investors makes sense in certain circumstances, but here the government has essentially allowed people to whiten their black money by investing it in the construction sectors. By all standards this amounts to giving holders of black money an amnesty scheme without the government gaining anything from penalties. This goes against everything that Prime Minister Khan has stood for and it negates his principal argument that the corrupt should not be rewarded for their corruption. The no-questions-asked decision has to make sense within a larger policy construct whereby there is sound economic, political and ethical justification for allowing the black deeds of people to be whitened without any cost at the altar of ill-conceived policies. The prime minister should be cognisant of the fact that, by going ahead with this policy of reviving the construction industry on the terms and conditions specified, he runs a real risk of undermining his own standing as a crusader against corruption. He may want to rethink the move before it starts to take a toll on his politics and on the health of Pakistanis at large.

Capacity payments

A MASSIVE wheel was set in motion last week when the Cabinet Committee on Energy decided to begin the process of renegotiating capacity payments with LNG terminal operators and the independent power producers. Hundreds of billions of rupees are at stake in the process and the move is no doubt going to lead to deep concern among the sponsors of the projects involved. The committee, chaired by Planning Minister Asad Umar, who has only recently taken charge of this crucial committee, made the decision in its last meeting on Thursday to begin the process of this renegotiation which can take up to three months to complete. The reasons given were fairly obvious — to help decrease the burden of power sector payments on the government, rationalise fuel costs and better manage the circular debt. In their initial responses to the idea, the IPPs have said that a contract is a contract, and that they are already so tight regarding liquidity, due to the repeated government failure to abide by its

payment terms, that any renegotiation will leave them financially destitute and unable to continue operations.

Over the years, the government of Pakistan has earned a bad name for itself for its failure to abide by the terms of long-term contracts entered into with sponsors of multibillion-dollar projects, but it is not difficult to see that this time it is different. The weeks to come will be some of the most difficult that the country has ever seen, and the question that every Pakistani needs to ask is 'what can I do to help'. This is not the time to say 'a contract is a contract'. All the resources of the state are required to shoulder the cost of the struggle ahead, to pay for massive increases in health investment and run social protection programmes for the poor and unemployed that could cost hundreds of billions of rupees every month. Moreover, power consumption has fallen sharply and fuel imports, in price and quantity, have also nosedived, causing capacity payments to climb since they are often indexed on off-take. This is nothing rational or moral about making capacity payments at a time when the state needs its resources for an intense battle against a global pandemic. Without the people, there is no economy, no power consumer, and no payments' stream. The IPPs and LNG terminal sponsors should understand this.

Digital help

AS the Covid-19 challenge continues to test the limits of healthcare infrastructure around the world, tech giants like Google have rolled out new features with the aim of helping both citizens and governments. Google's efforts include a crucial SOS Alert that connects people with the latest news and safety tips from the World Health Organisation. The tech company is also active in removing misinformation on platforms like YouTube and Google Search to limit the harm to unsuspecting users on the lookout for 'cures' and 'remedies'. In these unprecedented circumstances, artificial intelligence tools developed by some Silicon Valley companies are combing through coronavirus research databases to uncover new insights into the global pandemic. The role of technology and these platforms in this exceptional crisis is undeniable. Yet the companies at the helm of this technology have a huge responsibility towards citizens.

Google's recent release of location reports for 131 countries, including Pakistan, is helping health authorities assess if people are abiding by social distancing

orders, with the tech giant saying it has published the reports to avoid confusion about what is being provided to the authorities. Undoubtedly, these companies are the gatekeepers of data belonging to millions of citizens across the world — data which is used to generate profit through targeted advertising. For this reason, they must responsibly fight disinformation and aid governments and researchers wherever they can to help the world tackle the coronavirus outbreak. However, they must be cognisant of the fact that sharing any citizen data with governments means treading a fine legal and ethical line. China, Singapore, South Korea and other countries have asked residents to use technology to track their compliance with quarantines, but privacy activists argue such measures can compromise individual liberties. The anonymised geo-tracking of citizens can go a long way in helping governments enforce distancing, but it may also be open to misuse. As some experts have noted, technology can save lives, but if implementation unreasonably threatens privacy, more lives may be at risk.

Wheat and sugar investigations

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan is to be commended for keeping his word and releasing the findings of two investigations into the recent sugar and wheat flour shortages that led to an increase in the price of these items. The reports were made public without delay or alterations, even though they incriminate people close to the prime minister — something unheard of in previous dispensations.

And yet, the ensuing shakeup in government ranks has raised several questions. For instance, a number of ministers, advisers and bureaucrats linked with the damning probe have been given other portfolios — was this reshuffle essentially a face-saving exercise? Indeed, any action at this stage is a little premature.

The reports expectedly spawned demands from the opposition for immediate action against those believed to have benefited from the shortages and price hikes. In response, the premier rightly advised them to wait for the completion of the forensic audit of the scams.

In a series of tweets on Sunday, he said he was waiting for a detailed forensic report on the matter before taking action against anyone. A high-powered commission is expected to finalise the audit by April 25. He also said that “after these reports come out no powerful lobby would be able to profiteer at the expense of our public”.

A careful reading of the two inquiries underlines the need for patience as these reports — especially the one on the steep increase in the price of domestic sugar prices last year — while pointing to certain beneficiaries of government policies and decisions, do not fix responsibility. All this has only added to the mystery of the reshuffle.

On their own, the two reports do not contain anything new or startling. Most of the information contained in them has been extensively reported by the print and electronic media over the past few months. But what the reports do confirm is the deep connection between politics and the sugar and wheat trade as a whole.

The investigators appear reluctant to pin direct blame on the politicians and officials linked to the ruling party for fear of influencing the federal and provincial policies on sugar and wheat. And yet it is hard to dispute that those in the political corridors of powers have benefited from these policies.

A look at the report shows that it is not only sugar mill owners linked to the government who are beneficiaries of the billions doled out in the name of export subsidies, but also those associated with the PML-N and other parties. Governments need to break this nexus between politics and the sugar and wheat trade through extensive policy reforms if such crises are to be prevented in the future. That will mean a substantial reduction in the government's own role in the sugar and wheat trade and greater reliance on market forces.

Reopening business

IN a move that portends danger and has far-reaching consequences, the Punjab government has decided to reopen some businesses which had been shut as part of precautionary measures to curb the spread of Covid-19. The provincial government through three notifications has given the green signal to businesses — which include pharmaceutical and surgical goods, as well as textile, leather, sports equipment, laundry and money exchange services — to resume operations subject to the “implementation of precautionary measures”. The industries have been asked to restrict staff to a minimum and ensure measures against the spread of the coronavirus. However, the orders fail to say how these restrictions will be enforced. The death toll in Punjab stands at 15 and there have been more than 1,800 confirmed coronavirus cases there, with a spike in recent days that has been greater than in the other provinces. The provincial

government's decision to reopen these businesses and go back to 'normal life' could not be more ill-timed. Given the rise in cases in Punjab and the global reality of Covid-19's devastating effects, the rush to go back to routine life is perplexing. What is more alarming is that the decision has come at a time when a team of Chinese doctors in Lahore has advised exactly the opposite. The experts from China have suggested a 28-day extension of the lockdown, and invalidated theories that the coronavirus would fade in the summer. Furthermore, they said that social-distancing measures play an important role in containing the infection. Punjab's chief minister and health minister both met the visiting delegation and said the province would undertake all necessary measures to ensure the successful implementation of the Chinese model. Yet, businesses have been allowed to reopen without any clarity on the enforcement of precautionary measures.

While the negative impact of a lockdown on the economy is a valid concern and reopening pharma and surgical companies reflect the government's healthcare concerns, allowing other businesses to start functioning at this point betrays a lack of wisdom. Punjab must reconsider this decision and heed the advice of Chinese doctors who are all too familiar with the virus's spread. The province must also take note of the remarks of PTI leader Asad Umar, who has acknowledged that while the economy has taken a hit, a lockdown is effective in slowing the number of coronavirus cases. The country's healthcare system simply cannot cope with an escalation, which is likely if precautions are not strictly enforced.

PMDC conundrum

IN a peculiar move, a presidential ordinance last year dissolved the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council — and matters only got stranger from that point on. The abrupt announcement came after an earlier attempt to pass the PMDC Ordinance 2019 failed in the Senate, due to resistance from the opposition parties. Later, in a television interview, the former PMDC registrar narrated how he got a call in the evening last October from health ministry officials, telling him they had 'taken over' the body, and all employees were to go on a week's leave. However, when the 200-plus permanent and contractual workers studied the ordinance, they learnt that they had been fired from their jobs. Police constables barged in and seized the building — "as if it were a coup", the former registrar

noted in the interview — while officials from the National Health Services sealed the premises. And then, a new authority was formed, called the Pakistan Medical Commission, with the stated aim of modernising the medical education curriculum. The PMDC workers filed a petition, and in February, the Islamabad High Court declared the ordinance null and void, called the PMC illegal, and demanded that all dismissed employees be reinstated. And so, on March 31, the NHS de-sealed the PMDC building.

Despite being in the midst of a pandemic, however, the government is yet to restore the original body. The PMDC was not only responsible for upholding the registration of doctors and dentists, it also oversaw the standard of education in medical schools. The confusion of recent events has caused uncertainty for the future of thousands of students. In a recent report in this paper, health practitioners expressed their dismay at the present state of affairs, which they said was unnecessarily complicating the war against the coronavirus epidemic. To make matters worse, doctors in Quetta yesterday clashed with police over the non-availability of personal protective equipment. When will the government note that the health sector is ailing?

On the front line

IN the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, with over 4,000 confirmed cases in Pakistan, doctors and medical staff in Quetta clashed with the police, leading to the arrest of dozens of them. The reason: the non-availability of personal protective equipment and medical kits for healthcare workers in the province, which has resulted in several of them contracting the coronavirus. The president of the Young Doctors Association has warned that most services will not be provided until they are given the necessary equipment and tools to tackle the sudden upsurge in cases over the past few weeks. Meanwhile, the DG ISPR informed the media that essential supplies had been dispatched to Quetta.

In fact, the battle is a larger one. Healthcare workers across the country — indeed, the world — have been affected. Even in the UK, there are doctors and nurses who have threatened to quit due to the shortage of PPEs, reflecting the tremendous strain on them as they work long hours with limited resources to protect their infected patients, while exposing themselves to the infection. As evidence suggests, even asymptomatic patients can pass on the virus to others.

As early as February, when the first coronavirus case was detected in Karachi, there were warnings about shortages of essential items in public and private hospitals across the country. In one report in this paper, a healthcare expert lamented that only 1,200 respirators were available at the National Institute of Health in Islamabad, when the country required a total of 110,000 respirator masks, and 300,000 gloves were needed against the 100,000 available. While help has been pouring in from governments and private donors, and China has donated medical supplies including masks to Pakistan, it is not clear if these have reached the people who need them most. In KP, one doctor covered his head and hands with plastic bags to register his protest. The government launched an inquiry against him, only to withdraw it after the KP health minister intervened. Most tragically, doctors, too, have died after being infected with the virus: Dr Osama Riaz from Gilgit-Baltistan, and Dr Abdul Qadir Soomro from Sindh. In his last video message, the bedridden Dr Riaz joined his palms together and pleaded that the virus be taken seriously. He struggled to speak throughout the recording.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed many flaws in governance around the world, but perhaps nowhere is this most drastically felt than in the neglect of essential healthcare services. A mentally and physically exhausted workforce that is severely underequipped is simply going to lead to more situations like Quetta, and more tragic deaths, which can threaten to undermine whatever infrastructure is in place. After all, doctors are only human. It is impossible to win this war against the coronavirus without these brave front-line defenders showing up at work each day. We cannot afford to lose them.

Uzair Baloch reappears

AS mysteriously as he had been spirited away by the security forces in 2017 — after an equally intriguing arrest the year before — Uzair Jan Baloch, chief of the banned Pakistan Aman Committee, has resurfaced.

On Monday, the once feared kingpin of the Lyari gang war in Karachi was produced in an anti-terrorism court in Karachi by jail authorities after the army's V Corps, headquartered in the city, handed him over to them.

Uzair Baloch, according to the police, is the prime suspect in a rival gang leader's murder, an operation carried out in a particularly gruesome manner.

The victim, Arshad Pappu, his brother and another companion were allegedly abducted from a social gathering in Karachi's Defence Housing Society, taken back to Lyari, and slaughtered, with their bodies defiled for good measure.

The case could not be prosecuted after the military took Uzair Baloch into custody on suspicion of espionage and "leak of sensitive security information to foreign intelligence agencies".

Indeed, much still remains unknown about Uzair Baloch, who fled Pakistan in 2013 in the wake of the Rangers-led operation against organised crime in the city.

There are wheels within wheels in his 'career', a mix of extremely unsavoury activities facilitated by (often contradictory) allegiances with the power elite.

However, while Uzair Baloch as leader of the most prominent gang in Lyari — not to mention a one-time PPP ally later turned sworn enemy — occupied a unique place, other gangs were also willing pawns in a deadly political game, one far bigger than appearances would suggest.

The consequences of that tussle extended to the rest of the city and its cynically exploited ethnic fault lines.

Those who suffered the most though from the immediate fallout were the hapless citizens of Lyari.

For years, they knew not a moment's peace as armed gangs ran amok in the streets, battling it out over the proceeds of various rackets, and enticing the area's youth into a life of crime.

In February 2017, a confessional statement by Uzair Baloch was submitted to a Sindh High Court bench.

In it were startling revelations about a purported nexus between the PAC, the PPP's Sindh leadership and top police officials in land grabbing, extortion, gunrunning and various other criminal activities.

While these accusations must be transparently investigated, it must also be said that extended detentions, without plausible explanation, of individuals suspected of grave crimes against Pakistani citizens sully the state's reputation.

Stranded in UAE

WITH Covid-19 turning the global order upside down, governments worldwide have been taking unprecedented measures to halt the spread of the contagion. The foremost of these is internal lockdowns, coupled with the temporary closure of borders. In the midst of such difficult circumstances arises the question of repatriating citizens wanting to return from foreign shores. As reported in this paper on Tuesday, around 20,000 Pakistanis stranded in the UAE are seeking to return home. Expectedly, these individuals are facing a tough time in the Emirates; some have lost their jobs or have not been paid by their firms, while the visas of others have expired. As per media reports, “hundreds” of Pakistanis gathered outside the consulate in Dubai on Sunday demanding to return home.

The plight of citizens stranded abroad is indeed a dire one, especially when jobs have been lost. However, the question arises: can the health system in this country screen, quarantine and treat such a large number of people were they to be brought back immediately? The best possible response to this difficult situation would be for the state to work in close coordination with the UAE authorities to ensure Pakistanis stranded in the Emirates have access to quality healthcare, housing and food until the coronavirus crisis dissipates. The UAE government should extend the visas of those whose documents have expired, while Pakistani missions in the Emirates must keep in constant touch with stranded citizens to assure them that the state stands by them in these trying times, and that they will be able to return as soon as it is feasible. By no means should citizens feel that they have been left in the lurch by their government at a time of a global crisis. It is a fact that every citizen has the right to return home at any time of their choosing. However, those Pakistanis stranded abroad should be encouraged to return at a more opportune time, when the danger that an easily transmissible infection poses to public health has reduced considerably.

FATF extension

AN unexpected development has given Pakistan an additional two months in which to complete the action plan steps that were going to be reviewed in June. The Financial Action Task Force told the government of Pakistan that the June meeting will not be held due to the ongoing coronavirus situation and Pakistan's

progress on its action plan will be evaluated in August instead. No doubt this comes as a relief to some in the government, since much work remained to be done by June. But it would be a grave mistake to treat the additional time that has unexpectedly been granted as some sort of 'relief'. Sitting this time out would be in keeping with the reflexes that usually guide work in the government, but those reflexes would be a disservice.

Pakistan was already working under an extension, and in the last February meeting, was allowed six more months to complete 13 of the 27 items in its action plan that had been missed for the February review. Some action had indeed been taken in February, specifically the conviction of Hafiz Saeed in a terror-financing case, which was one of the biggest sticking points in the implementation of the action plan. But this was not the first time that we saw a spurt of action right when the taskforce was either meeting or getting ready to meet, creating the impression that all measures were simply being taken to have something to show for at the meeting. The extended time that has been granted can be used to help dispel this impression by advancing more terror-financing inquiries and tightening up the country's prosecution and conviction rate further in this crucial area.

What is more likely, however, is that the government authorities will show limited progress on the 13 points, where action is now required, and invoke the lockdowns as an excuse for asking for yet another extension. It would be better to use the time granted to us to try and push for full compliance, though, and given the window created by the lockdowns, of diminished economic activity, to hunt down all other avenues through which terror financing takes place. Instead of an excuse, the present conditions, in fact, grant an opportunity to the government. The priority now is not simply getting through the review meeting without falling into the so-called blacklist. The clear priority is to get off the grey list altogether. No matter how well the stars are aligned for us on the geopolitical table where Pakistan is seeking to draw linkages from, there is no better reason to aim for an expeditious end to the grey listing status than the country's own economic interests. In the perception of outside observers, a pattern has emerged of Pakistan taking cosmetic action and asking for extensions. This is a good moment to lay this view to rest.

Infected prisoners

ON Monday, the Supreme Court overturned earlier judgements made by the high courts to release under-trial prisoners in light of the coronavirus epidemic. Fearing the spread of the virus inside the notoriously overcrowded prison spaces, last month, the Islamabad High Court decided that all under-trial prisoners at the Adiala Jail, involved in minor crimes, were to be freed on bail, while also advising the police not to make further arrests of petty criminals during the health crisis. Following the order, nearly 300 prisoners were released from jail. Meanwhile, Sindh released hundreds of prisoners involved in minor crimes on the orders of Sindh High Court Chief Justice Ahmed Ali M. Shaikh. These decisions were in line with a global conversation about prisoner rights and capacity issues — the result of judicial lethargy and over-incarceration by law enforcement — during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah was correct to point out how susceptible prisoners were to the spread of the infection, especially given the poor hygiene standards, lack of medical care, and the already present ailments within prison confines. Earlier, a committee tasked with investigating human rights abuses and the lack of medical assistance in prisons found that over 5,000 inmates suffered from some form of illness, with nearly 2,400 inflicted with diseases such as HIV, hepatitis or tuberculosis. One can only dread what would happen to such vulnerable prisoners if they were infected by the novel coronavirus. How could anyone realistically ensure social distancing amongst prisoners, when, in Adiala Jail alone, some 5,000 prisoners are packed against the capacity of only 2,174 individuals? Furthermore, inmates could pass on the virus to prison staff they come in contact with, who would in turn infect their family and community.

The latest decision has come at a point when the coronavirus has already been detected within the prison population, although the apex court did retain an exception for under-trial prisoners who are incarcerated for crimes carrying a sentence of less than three years. Last month, the SC ordered the provincial authorities to ensure that fumigation is carried out within prison confines, but in Punjab alone, nearly 50 prisoners were recently diagnosed with the virus. It is a good time to be reminded of the fact that over 60pc of all prisoners are under trial, waiting to hear their verdicts, their fate hanging in a state of indefinite purgatory.

Taliban about-turn

THE peace process in Afghanistan was never going to be a smooth affair. This was something that even the most optimistic of observers had noted when reports emerged that the Afghan Taliban were negotiating with the Americans to strike a deal in the war-torn country. Sure enough, even though a deal was signed between the Taliban and the US in Doha at the end of February, implementation of some of the agreement's key points has been quite tricky. Take, for example, the prisoner swap mechanism between the Taliban and the Afghan government. It had been decided in principle that both sides would release each other's detainees as a confidence-building measure. Kabul is said to be holding around 5,000 Taliban fighters, while close to 1,000 government men are in the insurgents' custody. Late on Tuesday, the Taliban spokesman tweeted that his side would not participate in "fruitless meetings" with the Afghan government as the release of Taliban prisoners was being "delayed". As per reports in the media, Kabul is willing to release a few hundred low-level Taliban fighters, but the militia wants some of its top 'commanders' to be included in the deal.

Clearly, this is a major stumbling block. If not addressed, it can derail the entire peace process. The Taliban should realise that if talks fail, it would be back to the battlefield, meaning more of the same bloodshed that has been Afghanistan's fate for the past few decades. That is why both the Taliban and the Kabul government must reach some sort of compromise where the exchange of prisoners is concerned, so that the next phase of the peace process can be initiated. Sticking to maximalist positions will benefit no one and will only further complicate the deadlock. The gulf of mistrust between Kabul and the militant group is wide and deep. Therefore, out-of-the-box solutions are needed for peace to succeed. If the talks fail, the unfortunate people of Afghanistan must prepare for another prolonged season of violence.

Yemen truce

AMIDST much doom and gloom across the world, a faint flicker of hope has appeared for the impoverished and war-weary people of Yemen as a two-week unilateral ceasefire declared by the Saudi-led coalition took effect on Thursday.

The coalition had been pummelling Yemen since March 2015 in an effort to drive out the Houthi 'Ansar Allah' movement, believed to be allied with Iran, and that controls the capital Sana'a. Far from dislodging the Houthis, the Saudi-led war, supported by some of Riyadh's Gulf allies as well as the US and many in Europe, has been an unmitigated disaster for the people of Yemen, unleashing death, destruction and hunger upon some of the world's poorest, most vulnerable people. The truce comes after the UN appealed for a cessation of hostilities, while the Saudis say they made the move to prevent a coronavirus outbreak in Yemen. As opposed to previous reckless decisions, this appears to be a mature move from Riyadh, and all parties in Yemen, specifically the Houthis, should reciprocate.

However, a Houthi spokesman has been quoted as saying that they will continue to fight until the blockade of Yemen — enforced by the coalition — has been lifted. Considering the miseries confronting the Yemeni people, and the threat Covid-19 poses to the country, the Houthis should reconsider their rigid stance. Continuing to target Saudi cities and installations will surely draw a response from Riyadh, and the grim cycle of death in Yemen will only be prolonged. For the sake of the Yemeni people, the ceasefire must be respected by all. Moreover, the fact is that a coronavirus outbreak would have an even more devastating impact on Yemen, shattered as it has been after years of conflict.

Many in the international community have been unmoved by the plight of Yemenis, despite harrowing images coming out of the country of malnourished children and tiny coffins. However, now with Covid-19 — a foe that does not discriminate on national, religious or political grounds — ravaging the planet, the realisation seems to have dawned on those involved in the Yemeni conflict that something needs to be done. Saudi Arabia is grappling with its own coronavirus outbreak, with over 3,000 reported cases, and this may have played a role in the declaration of the ceasefire. And while no cases have been reported in Yemen, one shudders to think what the situation would be in the country should a Covid-19 outbreak be confirmed, as the health system barely exists, and infrastructure is in a shambles. However, the Houthis have a point in their demand for the blockade to be lifted. Considering the situation, aid must reach the Yemeni people unhindered, and were the blockade to be lifted, the ceasefire may increase the chances of success. If this experiment in peacemaking succeeds, more formal peace talks would also be given an impetus.

Quarantine lapses

THE consequences of the leaden-footed initial response to the coronavirus cases in much of the country are becoming clearer by the day. It has recently emerged that a large number of the 1,160 pilgrims who had arrived in Multan on March 20 from Iran via Taftan and earlier tested negative for the virus have since contracted the disease — a result of shambolic quarantine conditions in which they were detained in Multan. What makes the lapse so grave is that upon being released from detention, during which they interacted freely with infected patients housed in the same facility, they were allowed to return to their home districts. And even though they were quarantined at the end of their journey, they would have unwittingly spread the disease among uninfected fellow travellers and those they mingled with along the way. It seems the Multan district administration was not sufficiently backed by the provincial authorities in its efforts to prevent the spread of the virus among the pilgrims. The Punjab health department, despite requests by senior district officials, reportedly dragged its feet on testing them again before they went to their hometowns. Then, when the pilgrims— who had already spent a fortnight each of quarantine in Taftan and Multan — grew agitated upon being informed they would be tested again after all and have to remain in place pending the results, the police refused to intervene and restore order. The situation became fraught enough for the army to be called in. As a ‘compromise’, the pilgrims agreed to their samples being collected and sent off for testing while they were returned to their home districts.

As the results of those tests reveal, these are precisely the lapses in judgement, on the part of both the public and officialdom, which have spurred the spread of the virus. They will make it all the more difficult to ‘flatten the curve’, which would prevent the country’s already inadequate health facilities from being overwhelmed. Health protocols to address the various challenges posed by the pandemic, including those arising from the public’s cultural predispositions, should have been defined more clearly. After all, it was two months between the lockdown in Wuhan and the discovery of the first Covid-19 case in Pakistan — although to be fair, many other countries too dropped the ball. There needs to be a more coordinated, holistic approach to this crisis: half-measures and mixed messaging will merely exacerbate it.

Cruelty to animals

WHILE the rest of Sindh was — and continues to be — under lockdown, hundreds of animals in Karachi's Empress Market perished due to suffocation and starvation. The market had shuttered down two weeks earlier, after a lockdown was first announced by the provincial government on March 22. In haste, the shop owners evidently did not take any steps to ensure the protection of the animals in their care. Only a handful were rescued, thanks to the efforts of animal rights activists. However, by the time they reached, they noted that around 70pc of them were already dead, their lifeless bodies strewn on the floors of the shops. Even in the original epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak, Wuhan, thousands of animals left abandoned inside their homes during a strict lockdown were rescued by a concerned group of animal lovers. Like many diseases before it, the novel coronavirus too began from an animal source, and is likely to be connected to the international wildlife trade that is notorious for its ill treatment of animals.

Recently, in an article for the Financial Times, Arundhati Roy wrote that "...in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality". In a world where it is 'normal' to treat all living creatures as commodities to use and discard at will, and where human desire reigns supreme, animal rights are barely given a thought. Beyond necessity, they are seen as a means to an end — and the end is often profit — to satisfy human consumption and frivolity. While the pet industry is cruel in itself, encouraging practices such as breeding, perhaps nowhere is this brutality more evident than in modern factory farming. Millions of animals are abused, caged in small spaces, while those deemed 'useless' are exterminated without a thought — and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Ehsaas begins

THE largest distribution of direct cash assistance to the poor and unemployed began on Thursday as 4m people out of a total of 12m eligible recipients received the go-ahead to report to the nearest distribution point and collect Rs12,000. As the distribution gathers pace, it is hoped that it will play a significant role

in helping those who have been most badly hit by the ongoing lockdowns. There is no doubt that such an effort was needed urgently and the federal government should be commended for the speed with which they have made it operational. Perhaps it should also be borne in mind that this is the first such cash assistance being distributed through the Ehsaas channel, with more likely to become necessary next month, and perhaps again the month after that. A few important concerns continue to linger, though. First is the paucity of distribution points. Across the country, 17,000 points have been set up using the networks of two banks. This is far too small a number for an exercise of this scale. If done properly, the number should be more than 10 times this much. One result of this was seen in the massive crowds that formed outside the distribution points. Inside the premises, where the distribution was being carried out, it seemed that many places properly enforced the social-distancing protocols, but the entire effort appeared to be futile when people were forced to congregate in large crowds crammed tightly together outside the premises, as they waited for their turn to be let in. The purpose of cash assistance for the poor is defeated — in fact, reversed — if the beneficiaries are exposed to the hazards of contagion in the course of collection.

The government should urgently reverse its earlier decision to shut out the telecom companies from the disbursement of these funds, since mobile operators can multiply the number of distribution points manifold. They may charge a fee for their service, but banks make money by simply holding Ehsaas funds for a few days — and that money is made from the government's account, in any case, since it is the government that the banks are lending primarily to these days. The second important concern is targeting. It is clear that the initial list of eligible beneficiaries has been drawn up in a terrible hurry, but there is still time in which to tighten the criteria.

Trump vs WHO

THE American president is known to tweet first and ask questions later. However, in such unprecedented global circumstances, world leaders have a responsibility, more so than before, to issue carefully vetted statements, especially when discussing matters related to Covid-19. Earlier this week, Donald Trump launched a damaging critique of the World Health Organisation, accusing the UN-affiliated body of going soft on China, and threatening to cut American

funding for WHO. While there have been others who have also criticised WHO's response to the coronavirus crisis, saying that the global health body took too long to declare Covid-19 a pandemic, the fact is that this is not the time for censure; informed critiques of what should and should not have been done can wait until the crisis starts to subside. However, Mr Trump has never been one for subtle diplomacy. Moreover, his own response to the infection in the US has been criticised by American governors and mayors. The US president himself had early on downplayed the risks of the virus, preferring to keep the wheels of the American economy going. It is only after infection and deaths spiked in the US over the past few days that he changed tack.

Bashing multilateral organisations has been a favourite pastime of the US leader. In the past, he has heaped abuse on bodies such as the International Criminal Court and UN rights outfits, all the while upholding the principle of American exceptionalism. However, it is hoped he does not follow through on his threat to cut WHO's funds. Regardless of any errors of judgement during the pandemic, the health body has worked tirelessly, especially where developing countries are concerned, to put out the message that a global response is the only way to eliminate Covid-19. That response can best be marshalled by an outfit like WHO. Multilateralism may be far from perfect, but when a global health crisis challenges humanity, there may not be too many other options.

Lifting lockdown

REPORTS of the spread of the coronavirus in a katchi abadi in Karachi have raised the alarm for provincial authorities — and for good reason. In a video message, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah said his fear about the spread of Covid-19 in shanty towns has become a reality, as a family of seven living in a slum area had been infected. Flouting social distancing guidelines, the head of the family had gone out of his home and caught the infection, which he transmitted to his family members, including his one-year-old son and six-year-old daughter. In the same message, Mr Shah said the lockdown, which is in effect in the province till April 14, would be lifted in phases and that new SOPs to limit the coronavirus's spread would be announced for each sector. As he made this announcement, Pakistan's total confirmed Covid-19 cases had crossed

4,600 with almost 70 deaths. According to projections, the figure for confirmed cases will likely be in the tens of thousands by the end of the month.

The development is a major cause for concern, and the government's fears are not without reason. The mere idea of a fast-spreading virus penetrating densely populated slum dwellings is a nightmare for authorities already faced with the mammoth challenge of containing this virus. Transmission in these localities would occur rapidly, bringing death and more misery for a segment of the population already lacking basic social amenities. Furthermore, the extent of slum dwellers' 'underlying medical conditions' — a characteristic which the virus preys upon, often with fatal results — would be unknown to the authorities, compounding the healthcare challenge. Given these realities, and the limited capacity for testing and health services, all provincial governments must extend the lockdown for at least two weeks to assess the situation. From China to Italy, every medical expert has attested that a lockdown is the only way to curb the spread of this contagion. No doubt, such measures come with economic challenges, but by now, the authorities are well aware of those obstacles and should be in a better position to take the appropriate measures to provide some sort of relief while the majority is asked to remain home.

This approach towards a lockdown must be adopted by each province and reflected unanimously in the messaging of both the central and provincial governments. Unfortunately, the pandemic period in Pakistan is witnessing the discord and bickering that is so characteristic of our politics. The government must understand that now more than ever is the time to hold back grudges and develop a working relationship with the provinces. Disharmony, a lack of engagement and walkouts during meetings will only hurt the morale of healthcare workers and citizens who are grappling to adjust to a new world. Public officials ought to rise above petty politics and confront this unprecedented health and economic crises with solidarity in their ranks.

Dearth of test kits

ADEQUATE testing capability is integral to formulating a response to any health crisis. One can multiply that importance by several hundredfold in a pandemic situation. Sindh has been warning of a dire shortage of testing kits, and unless things change quickly, worse looms on the horizon. According to the provincial

government, the stock of 6,000 kits available with both public and private hospitals in its jurisdiction is sufficient for less than two weeks. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's effort to procure 300,000 kits from China and the UK for use in the province remains in limbo without the centre's authorisation for cargo flights to bring in the consignments. There must be a concerted effort to address the province's predicament. Consider that in the latest 24-hour tally, 20pc of the tests conducted in Sindh came out positive.

Testing enables authorities to isolate the individual and stem the spread of the virus. We are entering a stage where coronavirus cases in the country are beginning to show an exponential increase, even with limited kits and diagnostic facilities. It took the first 10 days of this month for Covid-19 infections to nearly double from 2,238 to 4,263. Pakistan has so far tested around 250 per million of its population, far more than India (129 pm), but much less than Iran (2,755pm). A true picture of the contagion may well be eluding the authorities because they are trying to ration the testing, limiting it to individuals presenting symptoms of Covid-19, or at most, those suspected of having come into contact with an infectious person. Many asymptomatic cases are slipping under the radar, leading to a skewed epidemiological picture.

Minister for Planning Asad Umar at a press conference yesterday said Pakistan now has the capacity to carry out at least 100,000 Covid-19 tests at 26 labs across the country. He also added that material for 100,000 test kits had been received on Friday, of which 50,000 would be given to Sindh and 25,000 to Balochistan. While scaling up diagnostic capacity, the government must also take testing further afield beyond urban centres through mobile vans or by setting up diagnostic facilities in district hospitals. As Chinese health experts in meetings with Pakistani officials have repeatedly emphasised, testing is key to mounting an effective defence against the coronavirus. On Saturday, it was announced that several areas in Karachi's District East were sealed because some residents had been diagnosed with Covid-19. Such scenarios are also increasingly taking place in other parts of the country. Enhanced diagnostic capacity can enable the authorities to make informed decisions about when an area-wise lockdown can be partially lifted, or even imposed in the first place. Unless mass testing — covering at least a substantial representative sample of the population — is instituted, we may be faced at some point with a widespread, unmanageable explosion of cases.

Quack supplies

A COTTAGE industry is cropping up around the provision of materials for the sanitisation of hands and surfaces, as demand shoots up across the country on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. We now have sugar mills and a brewery trying to enter the hand sanitiser market, while fibre glass manufacturers and fabricators are getting into the business of supplying disinfectant walk-through gates to an increasing number of buyers for official buildings, marketplaces etc. This is a natural response to the sharply rising demand for these products, but the growing cottage industry needs to be regulated. A recent survey by the Pakistan Standards and Quality Control Authority, for example, found that 23 of the total samples of the new hand sanitiser products they tested were substandard and would be ineffective against the coronavirus. A similar test now needs to be done on walk-through disinfectant gates, or tunnels, that are also mushrooming across the country.

The spread of these bootleg technologies is dangerous, especially because it may create a false sense of security among those who use it. For example, trader bodies are now urging provincial governments to allow the reopening of markets if they instal these walk-through disinfectant gates. The provincial authorities must refuse this offer and let the trader bodies know that the utility of these disinfectant gates or tunnels is very limited. They are alright perhaps for cargo supplies, but having people walk through them will do little to mitigate the possibility of being infected by a virus carrier. Beyond a false sense of security, what is particularly dangerous about these new unregulated technologies is the total lack of awareness regarding what is and is not a suitable disinfectant to use. According to a report in this newspaper, for example, doctors have warned that some of the chemicals being used for these walk-through gates are themselves toxic and pose a risk to the health of anyone who passes through them; they do nothing much when it comes to disinfecting. Strong notice needs to be taken of this proliferating cottage industry. Perhaps the PSQCA can do a similar study on these walk-through gates, and particularly the chemicals being used in them. Drap should consider releasing a list of approved chemicals for such use, as well as give guidance on what these walk-through gates can be used for, and where they will only be unhelpful.

Mob attack on police

THE issue of the temporary closure of mosques and other places of worship to prevent mass gatherings during the lockdown is a sensitive one. By and large, the response from the public in Karachi and the rest of Sindh has been positive. However, there have been a few ugly incidents, including one last Friday when a mob chased law enforcers in the metropolis's Liaquatabad area for trying to enforce the ban. Another unfortunate incident occurred in Orangi Town this Friday, when a mob attacked a police team that was trying to enforce the ban on Juma congregations. According to reports, the crowd pelted the police party with stones, injuring a number of personnel; a woman SHO, who courageously stood her ground, was among the injured. The mob attack illustrates the perils that law enforcers face while trying to do their duty and keep the peace in such volatile times.

The fact is that across the Muslim world, senior clerics of all schools of thought have endorsed the temporary suspension of religious gatherings in order to save lives during the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, some overzealous elements in this country are bent upon resisting both sage advice, and precautions highlighted by health professionals. On the one hand, Masjid al-Haram and Masjid al-Nabavi in Makkah and Madina have largely been put off limits to worshippers, while religious authorities in Iran and Egypt have said mass gatherings during the month of Ramazan will not be organised. However, in Pakistan, some clerics appear to feel that they have a better understanding of religion than many leading lights of the Islamic world, and can chart their own course. To prevent such ugly incidents from happening again, senior clergymen from all sects must guide their respective flocks to heed the state's guidelines regarding social distancing and temporary suspension of mass worship. Moreover, senior figures at the neighbourhood level must be engaged by local authorities to ensure that the law is respected for the sake of the public's health.

Need to restrict

WITH more than 1.5m people infected and upwards of 100,000 dead, the spread of the deadly coronavirus shows little sign of slowing down across the world. Italy, Spain and the United States remain the most affected countries, even as

the infection spreads to all corners of the planet. The projections are ominous and the worst may be yet to come. In this grim scenario, countries can do little more than try to 'flatten the curve' while scientists rush to find a vaccine. Even though testing on humans has started, experts say the actual vaccine that will be approved for usage may still be 12 to 18 months away. For Pakistan, this is a huge challenge. Prime Minister Imran Khan has started saying that our health system may come under tremendous stress by the end of the month. The pace of the spread of the infection has picked up dramatically and will likely reach tens of thousands within the next few weeks. The government may have belatedly got its act together, but despite all our best efforts to acquire equipment and beef up our health facilities, there is very little chance that we will be able to cope with the pressure of patients.

The only option we have, as do all other countries, is to maintain strict lockdowns and try to suppress the spread of the virus. However, recent announcements seem to suggest a certain laxity in restrictions. The Punjab government has announced the opening of some businesses, while the prime minister has already declared the construction industry will restart its activities shortly. The federal government has also said limited flight operations will resume soon and Pakistanis stranded abroad will be brought back home. These are all noble intentions and they point towards a need to get the economy going, but they run the risk of diluting the impact of the lockdowns. These steps also suggest a certain lack of clarity within the government, as it vacillates between lockdowns and economic activity. This is a difficult decision, but given the choice, it really is not. By diluting lockdowns, we will only be delaying the inevitable in terms of re-clamping restrictions and hastening it by triggering the spread of the virus.

The key priority at this stage is to slow down the pace of infections by every means possible in order to better prepare for the deluge. By giving in to the pressures of the economy — and there is no denying the reality of these pressures — the government is avoiding the hard choices that need to be made. It would be far better to make a clear plan around lockdowns for a limited period and strictly enforce it while speeding up relief to the weaker sections of society through the Ehsaas programme. Dithering will serve no purpose other than worsening an already bad situation.

Data protection

THE Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication last week published a draft of a personal data protection bill, with an invitation to stakeholders for feedback. With a May 15 deadline, the ministry maintained that the privacy of personal data of an individual has become “more relevant and important than ever” at a time when digital measures such as mobile phone tracking are being employed to contain the virus. While the government’s effort to move forward on data protection is encouraging, it has been a long time coming. A similar attempt was made during the PML-N tenure, but it did not yield results. In the absence of such legislation, and as internet and telecom penetration increase in Pakistan, citizens have been victims of privacy breaches and data leaks at the hands of companies, individuals and the state, without any repercussions.

There is no doubt that there is an urgent need for citizens to have legal protections for their data. The phrase ‘data is the new oil’ aptly describes how companies mine personal data to build and profit from profiles. In this respect, the current draft bill aims to govern the collection and processing of data and criminalise violations of privacy and data leaks. Yet, it is not very clear whether this scrutiny will apply to the state, which arguably controls the largest amount of citizen data — and has been accused of breaches. From Nadra to FBR to ECP, the state holds a wide range of private citizens’ information, including home addresses, biometric and electoral data, as well as information of ethnicity and religious beliefs. Given these large-scale data-gathering functions, the exemption given to the federal government under Section 31 is alarming, as it empowers the state to grant exemptions to “any data controller”. Furthermore, Section 38 stipulates that employees of the data protection authority will be public servants, giving rise to apprehensions that the legislation will not hold authorities accountable. Rights groups have correctly demanded a more independent and transparent decision-making process. They have also made a legitimate request for more time to critically examine the draft. The government must invite and accept the feedback given by these stakeholders with sincerity. Anything short of this would render this legislation a lip-service exercise rushed through to placate social media companies which the government is so eager to invite to Pakistan. The intention behind the legislation should be to protect the citizen, not just serve the interests of the state.

Mental health in jails

THE mind can be a prison for anyone afflicted with a mental health disorder. But for the countless mentally ill prisoners languishing in Pakistani jails, there is little to no treatment or respite from their ailments. Indeed, the harsh conditions within the prison confines exacerbates underlying illnesses, as many are thrown into these overcrowded spaces that lack natural sunlight and air, and privacy, and are often subjected to violent and volatile behaviour. There is also evidence of drugs being used within prisons, and torture used as a method to subjugate or exhaust inmates into compliance. Those prisoners who are placed in tiny isolation cells are perhaps the most vulnerable of all, lacking any human connection or understanding. While these prisoners should be receiving treatment, they are instead weighed down by the twin stigma of being both mentally unwell and a prisoner, and are thus condemned by society for being 'deserving' of their suffering — regardless of whether or not they are indeed guilty of their crime beyond reasonable doubt.

On Saturday, for instance, a report in this paper detailed the tragic tale of Kanizan Bibi, who was thrown into prison around 30 years ago, when she was just a teenager, for the murder of six individuals. She had been accused of being an accomplice in the murder of her employee's wife and children, and was charged under Section 302/304 of the Pakistan Penal Code. Later, she was handed the death sentence, along with her employer, who was hanged to death in 2003. Despite being declared schizophrenic, and her death sentence being halted in a presidential stay, Kanizan Bibi is not a free woman and the noose still hangs around her neck. Last year, the mentally unwell prisoner Khizar Hayat breathed his last in a hospital, after suffering for 16 years in confinement. In his final days, Khizar was a shadow of his former self, suffering from hypertension and anaemia. May no one else be subjected to such a dreadful fate.

Economic projection

THE World Bank has just released its first major report looking in detail at the economic projections for the South Asian region as the Covid-19 fight continues, and the findings are severe. In uncharacteristically blunt language, the report declares at the outset that the economic scenario staring the entire region in the

face is “dire”. The impact on poverty could be “catastrophic” and the region will see “the worst economic performance of the last 40 years”. The bank has brought the regional growth forecast down to a range between 1.8pc and 2.8pc for the year 2020, where its earlier forecast was 6.3pc only six months ago. This is a near catastrophic downgrade, and for Pakistan the projection for the ongoing fiscal year could be as dismal as negative 2.2pc, meaning the economy would actually have shrunk instead of having grown.

But this is not even the top item to focus on, though it certainly captures the depth of the economic recession facing the country now. The largest item to focus on is the impact on the poor. The latter are more likely to become infected, the report notes, because they live in cramped quarters and have diminished access to healthcare as well as basic hygiene products such as soap. They are also more likely to lose their jobs, and are more affected by food price spikes, which could well be an unintended outcome of the lockdowns if due attention is not given to keeping the food supply chain moving. The bank rightly points to the grave vulnerabilities of South Asian countries, and the poorer segments in particular, when it comes to tackling the virus.

As the authorities in Pakistan — federal and provincial — grapple with the politics and ground realities of the lockdowns, at some point it will become necessary to also start looking at ways to jumpstart the economy. The report points this out as a clear area of focus, even though its projections show that the economy will be largely moribund all through 2021 as well. That will be the moment when the play of vested interests is sure to kick in with maximum force. Already we can see powerful elements from manufacturing and services increasingly using their considerable clout to find ways to either loosen the lockdown or lift it altogether. When the time comes to jumpstart the economy, this same game will be magnified, and all sorts of schemes will be advanced in the name of reviving growth, but whose main purpose will be to channel the flow of public resources into private hands. Putting vested interests aside during the days of the lockdowns while the fight against the Covid-19 virus is waged is critical to ensuring that whatever growth emerges at the other end of this tunnel is equitable and sustainable.

Medics under threat

REPORTS that dozens of healthcare workers have contracted Covid-19 as they battle the pandemic in Pakistan are alarming.

In Multan's Nishtar Medical Hospital, as many as 27 doctors and paramedics have been confirmed as having contracted the virus. In the same hospital, one official observed that the total number of medics exposed to the coronavirus was higher, alleging that many test reports had not been made public — a claim yet to be substantiated. In Karachi, the count for healthcare staff so far diagnosed with Covid-19 is close to 40.

The Pakistan Medical Association has blamed the rise of infections within medical staff on the unavailability or poor quality of personal protective equipment.

Pakistan has already lost two doctors, young Dr Usama Riaz and the veteran Dr Abdul Qadir Soomro, to Covid-19.

That medics are being provided low-quality, ineffective masks instead of the WHO-mandated N-95 masks is an indictment of the government's ability to tackle the crisis. PPE for medical staff is a most fundamental and crucial step in the fight against Covid-19, and one that the authorities here have been aware of for some time now.

Pakistan recorded its first case at the end of February, and prior to that, was aware for months about the rising number of coronavirus cases in the region. Despite having some time to prepare after the international community sounded the alarm, it is unfortunate that the authorities did not procure sufficient equipment or implement a strategy to protect medical workers.

There are reports that some workers are being asked to wear the less protective surgical masks even when dealing with suspected Covid-19 patients. While the government maintains that PPE is being provided to only those medical staffers dealing directly with coronavirus patients, it has failed to develop a system whereby a suspected Covid-19 patient is prevented from roaming around the hospital premises before reaching a designated coronavirus ward.

Lack of protective gear, which also includes gloves and protective suits, will inevitably result in more doctors contracting the disease — especially those dealing with patients who are asymptomatic. The chief ministers of all provinces must prioritise the safety and health of medical staff and engage with the medical community to understand where the gaps lie.

Underreporting confirmed tests and indulging in a blame game will crush the healthcare system. Medics must be protected at all costs; without them, the war against Covid-19 is but a series of one-sided, losing battles.

AJK shelling

AT a time when all responsible states should be concentrating their energies on the battle against Covid-19, India is up to no good along the LoC, with deadly results. On Sunday, Hussain Mir, a four-year-old boy living in an Azad Kashmir village near the LoC, was killed by shrapnel from an Indian shell which exploded when he was standing in the courtyard of his house. Of course, this is not the first incident of its kind. In the last few days, several civilians in AJK have been wounded due to Indian shelling, some of them some critically. A senior Azad Kashmir official told this paper that since the start of the year, three people have been killed while 54 have been injured due to Indian aggression.

Such heartlessness and bellicosity is completely unacceptable. However, the fact it is happening at a time when the entire globe is busy trying to contain a deadly pandemic makes the Indian LoC violations even more egregious. Apart from the tragic loss of life, the Indian military is trying to provoke this country into responding to its irresponsible behaviour. Last week, the army shot down an Indian drone that had violated Pakistani airspace. Indeed, the Pakistan-India relationship is currently going through an intensely bitter phase. But the common foe both states face in the form of the coronavirus should convince India to desist from its provocative tactics, and encourage a spirit of cooperation for the sake of the people of South Asia. Covid-19 knows no borders, and a regional, in fact global, response is needed to vanquish the virus. If India continues to carry out such inadvisable violations of the LoC and similar cross-border hostilities, Pakistan will respond in kind. This will take away attention from one of the gravest health emergencies of the modern epoch. The Indian state should act responsibly and refrain from its adventures in order to save previous lives, and to

prevent the pandemic from spreading further in one of the most populous regions of the world.

Domestic violence

WHEN governments around the world first began announcing lockdown measures to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, a distinct unease was expressed by women activists, rights group and shelter homes, remembering all too clearly the fallout of previous environmental and financial disasters on families. With millions of people confined to the four walls of their homes during the current crisis, they feared there would be a sudden increase in the number of domestic violence cases, especially against children and women. And, indeed, this is precisely what is now being witnessed around the world. In the US, for instance, domestic abuse helplines and police stations have been receiving 10pc to 30pc more distress calls in recent weeks. With self-isolation being encouraged or enforced by states, victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault are largely being forgotten in the 'big picture' battle against Covid-19. However, such vulnerable individuals are facing multiple layers of isolation: trapped in close proximity with their abusers who mentally and physically torture them, and with nowhere to escape, they are cut off from any kind of support system they may have been able to access before the lockdowns were put in place. Added to this is the rise of unemployment and stress within families, which is known to lead to increased instances of violence.

According to WHO, approximately 38pc of all women's murders are committed by an intimate partner, and Pakistan has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world. Keeping these chilling realities in mind, and acknowledging the current strain on law-enforcement agencies, the Women Action Forum has urged the Sindh government to ensure protection of vulnerable women and children during these difficult times by upholding laws such as the Sindh Domestic Violence Act, 2013, and making sure that domestic violence helplines and shelter homes remain in operation. This advice should extend to all of Pakistan. The current pandemic may be a new threat that we may know how to defeat, but violence against women is an age-old evil.

A risky choice

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has announced a continuation of the lockdown for another two weeks — but there will be exemptions that may see thousands of Pakistanis getting back to work. Speaking after the meeting of the National Coordination Committee, Mr Khan said that the majority of the decisions had the consensus of the federal and provincial governments while in some areas the provinces would decide the policies themselves. A list of industries and sectors that would open on the condition that they would strictly enforce standard operating procedures defined by the government was also announced. The construction sector is now also officially open for business along with its allied industries that constitute a lengthy list. For all practical purposes then, Pakistan will now be observing a partial lockdown.

This policy reflects the balance that the government is trying to achieve between social distancing and economic revival. It is a policy fraught with grave risks. The government appears to believe — as evidenced by the remarks of the prime minister's special assistant on health, Dr Zafar Mirza — that the mortality rate is below what it was feared to be and therefore, perhaps, opening up of workplaces could be a risk worth taking. The Sindh government, on the other hand, has been very clear that lockdowns are the best way to ward off the spread of infections and contain the contagion before it spirals out of control. On this count, the policies pursued by the Sindh government may not be exactly those that the prime minister announced on Tuesday. This difference of opinion has persisted over the weeks since Covid-19 infected the first Pakistani and to date the federal and Sindh governments have not been able to come to an understanding.

We have now entered a critical stage. Governments are ramping up testing — if official figures are to be believed — and the next few weeks could see a burgeoning of infections across the country. Of course, what really defines the gravity of the situation is the death rate and if this does not increase exponentially then we may have cause for cautious optimism. We will not have to wait long to figure out which way the numbers are going. With a diluted lockdown and more tests being carried out, by next month we should have a fair idea if the decision to open up was the right one or not. The prime minister was correct when he said every choice today carried a risk. The question of course is whether the choice made is based on political considerations or solid scientific

and data-based reasons. This matters because the cost of a wrong decision will be measured less in rupees lost and more in lives lost. That is a steep price to pay for any country regardless of its economic prowess.

Back to the future?

AMIDST a once-in-a-century pandemic, there is a sense of déjà vu in the lofty halls of the Supreme Court.

Not so distant memories of judicial activism have been rekindled.

On Monday's hearing in the suo motu case relating to the federal and provincial governments' handling of the coronavirus contagion, the apex court excoriated both for their lack of cohesion in a situation that "demands consensus and uniformity".

The bench also set aside the Punjab government's decision to ban inter-provincial movement on the grounds it violated the citizens' right to move freely in the country.

In a sign of its extreme displeasure at how matters are developing, the bench even came close to ordering that Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Dr Zafar Mirza be removed from his post.

The judges, however, stayed their hand when the attorney general pleaded that such a step at this critical juncture would be disastrous for the country's efforts against the spread of the virus.

A crisis that upends people's lives and jeopardises their very means of survival is by definition one that involves fundamental rights, whose violation is the legal basis for the Supreme Court's suo motu powers.

However, the governments at the centre and in the provinces — indeed in the world at large — are grappling with an emergency for which there is no precedent.

In these circumstances they must have the space to make executive decisions while relying on their best judgement without having to second-guess every step.

The sense of paralysis and demoralisation that could set in otherwise would lead to complete disarray in the short term and to deleterious unforeseen consequences in the future.

Former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's tenure is a sobering reminder of what can transpire when judicial activism impinges on the executive sphere.

The Chaudhry-led Supreme Court overturned the Pakistan Steel Mills' privatisation, bringing a premature end to the divestment of state enterprises that have saddled the country with hundreds of billions of rupees in accumulated losses.

In 2013, an apex court bench headed by Mr Chaudhry declared as null and void the government's agreement with an international consortium for mining rights in Balochistan's Reko Diq.

A World Bank arbitration court last year ordered Pakistan to pay the consortium a staggering \$5.9bn in reparations.

The damage to the country's reputation as a sound investment destination for global players will linger for a long time to come.

Maintaining lockdown

PICTURES of crowded vegetable markets in some of Pakistan's largest cities in recent days paint a grim picture of how friable the lockdown effort has become, even under ostensibly stricter measures prior to the announcement of a partial lifting of the lockdown. They point to troubling lapses in implementation and suggest that compliance will only get worse now that certain industries and trades are allowed to resume operations. Such a mammoth undertaking was never going to be easy, and fatigue was inevitable. Now, however, the challenge is justifying to a struggling populace the criteria by which certain sectors are classified as 'low-risk' or 'essential', while maintaining how vital it is for the rest to continue to make sacrifices to stay at home. If people sense discrimination or half-heartedness at the government's end, they may see little reason to play their part. Yet each instance of complacency risks exponentially increasing the impact of this crisis. Pakistan cannot be lulled into a false sense of security simply because we have fewer confirmed cases than some other countries. This may be due to a host of epidemiological factors, but what is certain is that we are still far

from testing enough to have an accurate picture of the prevalence of Covid-19, with potentially many more cases — and even deaths — than have been confirmed. We must therefore utilise the time the lockdown has bought our frail healthcare system to intensively ramp up tracking, testing and treatment capacities.

The priority at this point should be to save lives. This requires that the federal and provincial governments decide on a joint strategy to mitigate the contagion as well as its socioeconomic impacts. Regrettably, however, while Planning Minister Asad Umar spoke of collaboration between the governments during Tuesday's press conference, some federal officials have taken to publicly belittling Sindh's efforts — with the provincial government at times retaliating — even to the extent of comparing provincial performances as though this is a competition and not a crisis. This must stop at once. Wasting time and energy on petty politics will only put more lives at risk. Economic hardship, especially for the poor, is of as much concern as the spread of infections, and both sides will need to compromise. Now is the time to build on the Ehsaas Programme, and develop a more holistic response in which charities and NGOs can also be mobilised to expand humanitarian aid and social safety nets.

With the easing of the lockdown, Pakistan is at yet another inflection point in this long, arduous struggle. The federal government along with the provinces must reassess within a week whether the situation is improving. If it isn't — and, unfortunately, what little can be said about the trends isn't encouraging — it will have to reimpose and even enhance restrictions. We cannot afford to let our guard down.

SBP Act

THE State Bank is a central pillar of Pakistan's economic management, and any reform of its constitutive law, especially if the reform is to touch on the core mission of the bank, must be carefully deliberated. At the moment, the State Bank Act endows the central bank with two core missions. First is to ensure price stability and second is to support growth. There is nothing inherently unusual in this since many central banks around the world do have a mission to safeguard growth in addition to price stability. The problem comes in when these two missions pull in opposite directions and the central bank leadership has to make

a choice. Powerful political forces are unleashed in these times and the governor finds himself or herself in the centre of a policy storm which can get quite intense. In the past, for example, the State Bank under the leadership of Ishrat Husain leaned too far in the direction of a permissive monetary policy to support the growth process ushered in by the Musharraf regime, thereby laying the groundwork for an inflationary spiral that began in 2005 and engulfed the entire economy by 2008. Similarly, Shamshad Akhtar, his successor, found herself in the midst of a political storm when it became her job to put out the inflationary fire and safeguard the health of the financial system under the massive imbalances that had accumulated during the short-lived growth spurt that the Musharraf regime bequeathed to us.

Today, this history has gained new relevance because the State Bank Act is being amended under the ongoing IMF programme, and pressure from the Fund is to refocus the central bank's attention purely on the mission of ensuring price stability. In an ideal world, this might sound like a good idea, since it has the virtue of ensuring that the monetary mistakes made in the Musharraf regime do not happen again. But at the same time, it is important to understand that the State Bank cannot be a stand-alone entity altogether, and whatever amendments are made in its constitutive legislation carry the assent of the political leadership in Islamabad, along with the opposition. The State Bank must, therefore, engage productively with the political leadership in helping draft these amendments, but it is the latter that will decide the limits of the possible in this case. In the meantime, the central bank clearly has a difficult balancing act to perform.

Trump's ego

ONCE again, US President Donald Trump has let his ego get the better of him. In the midst of a pandemic, he has suspended funding for the World Health Organisation, engaged in yet another blame game, peddled misinformation, and endangered countless lives in the process. Last week, Mr Trump had accused the global health body of being pro-China and reacted angrily to criticism of how he handled the crisis. Instead, he blamed WHO for misleading the world, and distracted attention from the real issues by targeting his favourite scapegoat: the media. At this point in time, when over 2m cases of the novel coronavirus have been reported throughout the world, with over 128,000 deaths, Mr Trump's actions and words come across as inexcusably selfish and dangerously reckless.

While this is a difficult time and there are no quick or easy solutions to the problems confronting leaderships around the world, and even if some criticisms of global humanitarian bodies are valid, they are the only institutions battling misinformation on a global scale, providing essential supplies and services to those who need them the most, and connecting the world by upholding some semblance of a global community, which is especially important in times of growing polarisation and parochial concepts of nationalism — something Mr Trump and others fuel well. Because, truly, we are all in this together.

Failing to take timely action and refusing to listen to the experts, the US now has the highest rate of infection anywhere in the world, with under-equipped and under-resourced hospitals and medical staff struggling to contain the spread of the virus and save lives. Already, over 609,000 people have been diagnosed in the US, while around 26,000 are known to have died from it. At the rate the number of cases is climbing, it is difficult to even keep track of the figures, but it is the poor who are most vulnerable. The world cannot revolve around one rich man.

A stealthy contagion

A VIRUS that spreads stealthily even through asymptomatic individuals is obviously one most difficult to counter, especially when diagnostic capabilities are far less than optimal. Thus when there seems to be a curious spike in the numbers of people either dead or near death when brought to hospitals in Karachi, it raises the inevitable question, are Covid-19 fatalities in the country actually higher than so far reported? The Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, while pleading the case for a stricter lockdown, alluded to the possibility at a press conference on Wednesday. He said there had been 15 unexplained deaths in the city of people who, it was discovered later, had been displaying symptoms of coronavirus infection. Similar apprehensions have been voiced in other quarters. According to health officials quoted in the media, a large number of patients brought to private and public hospitals during the last 15 days were either dead on arrival or had breathed their last within hours from respiratory distress typical of Covid-19. Considering the lockdown makes it more difficult to access timely medical attention for any illness, and also that the bodies of most deceased are handed over to their families without a postmortem, it is difficult to

state the cause of death with any certainty. Nevertheless, what is clear is that only more testing can cut through the fog and give us a true picture.

Federal Minister for Planning Asad Umar a few days ago said that testing capacity in the country would be increased from 6,584 to 25,000 per day by the end of this month. On Wednesday, 5,540 tests were conducted across the country, the most so far within the span of a day; ramping up the frequency cannot happen too soon. In the 24 hours ending Thursday night, 520 new cases came to light, the second-highest number since testing began. Sadly, during the same period, Pakistan also reported its highest single-day total of Covid-19 fatalities with 17 deaths. A testing drive launched in several shantytowns and Covid-19 hotspots in Karachi collected over 1,700 samples: the results should offer some idea of the spread of the infection in areas of the megacity where social distancing is nigh impossible.

The importance of detaining all Covid-19 patients at designated quarantine facilities until they recover is becoming clearer by the day. It seems that symptomatic or mildly symptomatic individuals who have been given the option of 'home isolation' may be driving local transmission rates. Health experts from China, in the light of their own experience, had cautioned Pakistani authorities that patients either do not rigorously enough observe distancing protocols in familiar surroundings, or cannot do so because of their cramped living conditions. The government must expand its quarantine facilities and omit the 'home isolation' option. Only then can we arrest the spread of the contagion.

Debt relief

SINCE Pakistan is now set to participate in the debt relief plan just approved by the G20 group in its meeting on Wednesday, it is reasonable to expect a significant amount of support for the external sector in the months ahead. This is undoubtedly good news for the country as the Covid-19 battle looks set to intensify. For now, all debt-service obligations that will be due between May 1 and Dec 1, 2020, are eligible for relief under the terms agreed to, but there are very good chances that this period will be extended to June 2021. The G20 have left the door wide open for precisely this extension by allowing for two reviews, one in July and another in November, during which the possibility of an extension can be considered. The IMF and the World Bank both played a key role in

drafting the terms of the plan and championing it at the meeting, in consultation with a grouping of African countries that had raised a collective voice for this debt relief and advanced the diplomacy required to bring it to fruition. The G20 had a decision to make about which countries to include in the plan, and it had a choice between using the UN list of Least Developed Countries or the World Bank's list of countries eligible to borrow under the International Development Authority. The G20 chose to run with the latter list, to Pakistan's good fortune because the country does not feature on the UN list.

Good fortune has landed us on the eligibility list for this debt relief, but it would be a big mistake to leave it up to fortune to decide how the ensuing comfort on the external side will be used. To some extent, the State Bank has already used up some of the space opened up by slashing interest rates in a second emergency announcement on Thursday. This is a fair move because there are rapidly diminishing reasons for why interest rates should remain elevated. But going forward, whatever comfort opens up on the external sector will be eyed greedily by vested interests, and the temptation to manage the exchange rate will be large. Such temptations must be resisted. There is no telling how long the fight will be, how deep the recession will actually go, and how much longer the taps of external support will remain open. It would be better to use the savings to build reserves.

Congregational prayers

THERE appears to be some apprehension over a possible clash between the state and clerics regarding the issue of congregational prayers in mosques in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Earlier this week, at a press conference in Karachi, some of the leading scholars from the Deobandi, Barelvi and Ahle Hadith schools of thought had announced they were ready to resume daily and Friday prayers in mosques.

However, considering that such an edict would allow for mass gatherings in mosques to resume in these perilous times, the state swung into action, with the federal religious affairs minister contacting some of the clerics involved in making the announcement, in the hope of convincing them to rethink their plan.

The efforts seem to have paid off for now at least as Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman, who was at the Karachi presser, said on Thursday that a “road map” on congregational prayers would be discussed with other clerics. It is hoped other senior ulema take a cue from Mufti Muneeb’s welcome change in stance.

Indeed, freedom of worship is a constitutional and human right.

But at a time when a highly contagious pandemic is ravaging the planet, freedoms need to be exercised with some caution.

Considering the fact that the faithful would be in close contact with each other inside mosques, the state made the right decision to temporarily suspend congregational prayers.

This should not be seen as an affront to religion; rather, it is an attempt to save the lives of the general public.

After all, the Tableeghi Jamaat went ahead with its ijtema in Raiwind despite government advice against holding the gathering.

The result has been that hundreds of suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases have been linked to the religious outfit.

Other Muslim states, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey among them, have also suspended congregational prayers, including Juma prayers, so clerics in Pakistan have no justification to flout the ban.

To prevent the outbreak in this country from getting worse, clerics need to work with the state.

IMF facility

THE news of new lending from the IMF totalling \$1.3bn is a welcome development as Pakistan’s external pressures are growing and exports and remittances fall. The details released by the IMF one day after the announcement shows that along with the G20 countries’ debt relief plan, Pakistan’s external debt position has also been helped by China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. China has rolled over \$2bn worth of its deposits in March, the kingdom has already refinanced \$3bn of its loans that matured between November and January, while the UAE has also rolled over its \$1bn loan. Substantial space is now opening up

on the external front for Pakistan even as exports and remittances are set to plummet, registering negative growth rates of 2.1pc and 4.8pc respectively. So the comfort coming from creditors is doubtless welcome.

In the language of the economists, the higher current account deficit is set to be compensated by lower financial account outflows, as well as unscheduled support from multilateral creditors. After the IMF, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are also set to repurpose close to \$250m towards balance-of-payments support for Pakistan. On the external side, enhanced borrowing from multilateral creditors, along with the suspension of debt-service obligations for a limited period, will provide some breathing room for the government to avoid any crisis situation.

But two things must be remembered through all this. The first is that the space has opened up mainly through more borrowing, and the suspension of debt-service payments can only give momentary respite. Those payments are set to begin again in 2022. The second thing to bear in mind is that all dollars are not equal. Reserves with borrowed money provide less comfort than those built with earned money. The IMF provides a timely warning that with the economy undergoing its first ever contraction since 1952, “risks associated with policy slippages and resistance to reforms, including from vested interest groups, loom large”. Already one can see the billionaires’ club moving into action around the government, with vested demands couched in the language of public interest or job creation in their hands. Wherever space opens up, whether fiscal or external, or even in the allocation of subsidised natural resources, these same elements are the first ones at the door with demands for why they should be the ones with privileged access to the resources accrued. There is no doubt that the same play will turn towards the external sector space that has just opened up. It was uncanny to see the stock market celebrate this with a rally in the midst of a powerful and historic economic contraction. This is what must be resisted, and careful thought should be given to how best the public interest can be served with this relief.

Blaming Muslims

IN a radical move that bears all the hallmarks of bigotry, India has brought charges of culpable homicide against a senior cleric for holding a gathering last

month that authorities say led to a big jump in coronavirus infections in that country.

Head of the Delhi-based Tableeghi Jamaat Markaz, Maulana Muhammad Saad Khandalvi was booked for manslaughter by police under a provision of the Penal Code which carries a maximum punishment of 10 years in prison.

While there is little doubt that Tableeghi Jamaat leaders acted irresponsibly by continuing congregations in several countries, including Pakistan, despite the threat from the coronavirus, the extreme reaction from the Indian authorities betrays the latter's intolerant and bigoted approach towards Muslim citizens.

The action is very much in line with India's unabashed and sustained discrimination against Muslims under the Modi regime.

The recent move to stigmatise and make an example of a Muslim community leader has not occurred in a vacuum.

It closely follows the dangerous path cemented by the ruling BJP and its Hindu supremacist outlook.

From the crackdown on India-held Kashmir, to the biased citizenship law that blatantly targets Muslims, India has over the last year been creating a suffocating atmosphere of fear and hostility for one of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

In this time of crisis, attempting to blame a race or religion can be dangerous, and will push an already battered community to the edge.

Repeated attempts by US President Donald Trump to frame the coronavirus as a 'Chinese virus' have resulted in a marked escalation in racism-fuelled attacks on Asian communities.

Similarly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's systematic targeting of Muslims and the impunity with which his government publicly attacks them have set the stage for grave repercussions for the community.

In the aftermath of BJP officials labelling Tableeghi leaders as "Talibani criminals" and bandying about the term "corona jihad", a string of anti-Muslim attacks have been reported in India.

Muslim men distributing food to the poor have been beaten with cricket bats; many others have been labelled “virus spreaders”, badly beaten or chased out from their residential communities.

A report in The Guardian describes how Muslim-owned businesses have been boycotted and workers accused of spitting in food and infecting water supplies with the virus.

As the world grapples with the deadly Covid-19 phenomenon which has severe consequences for society and the economy, the Indian government must put humanity first.

Shelter in place

WHEREVER economic inequality exists, it is reflected, enacted and maintained through the anti-poor biases of a people and their policymakers. Pakistan is no exception; for decades, we have closed our eyes and numbed our hearts to the abject poverty and deprivation that surrounds us. Yet to witness not just neglect but active cruelty in the midst of the pandemic — when the prime minister himself has repeatedly expressed his concern for the impact it will have on the poorest among us — is a shocking new low. On Thursday, dozens of houses in a katchi abadi in Islamabad were razed to the ground — ostensibly a continuation of recent anti-encroachment drives in Pakistan’s major cities — as their inhabitants watched helplessly. Most of us would not have known had it not been for members of the Awami Workers Party, who arrived on site and began uploading video footage of the demolition on social media. Indeed, it seems many high-ranking officials did not know, as indicated by Minister of Human Rights Shireen Mazari, who immediately took notice of the issue. Dr Mazari stated that the demolition occurred apparently without the knowledge or consent of the interior ministry or CDA, which is itself troubling considering it took place in the federal capital of all places. With the official who sanctioned the operation suspended and an inquiry under way, it remains to be seen what the extent of wrongdoing is and the possibility of criminal land mafia involvement. Mercifully, thanks to the minister’s intervention, the forcibly evicted residents have been provided with tents and food for the time being. Given that the government is already struggling to stretch scarce resources to support many jobless and shelterless Pakistanis during this crisis, however, it is unfortunate that this issue was wilfully

compounded. We should not be making it any harder for the poor to shelter in place during the lockdown than it already is. There must be a moratorium on forced evictions in the absence of the long-term provision of low-income housing.

Progress in Yemen

THERE is reason for cautious optimism where ending the debilitating war in Yemen is concerned, as the UN's top official for the country says "very good progress" is being made towards a ceasefire in the war-torn state. Earlier this month, the Saudi-led coalition had declared a unilateral ceasefire in its war against the Houthi rebel movement. The Houthis responded coolly to the truce, saying they would reciprocate if a crippling blockade of Yemen, enforced by the coalition, was lifted. However, while fighting between the two sides has continued, as per the UN's assessment, efforts on "reaching consensus" continue and agreements could be reached "in the immediate future". For Yemenis, who have lost tens of thousands of their countrymen in this vicious war, while millions remain hungry and sick, this is welcome news. This is especially so when the first case of Covid-19 has been reported in the battered country. This may, of course, only be the tip of the iceberg — considering the fact that Yemen's health system has been shattered by over five years of conflict, the true number of coronavirus cases are likely to be far greater.

Both the Yemeni government and their Saudi backers, as well as the Houthi fighters and their Iranian allies, must realise the gravity of the situation and fast-track the peace process. While it may sound alarmist, Covid-19 may be a ticking time bomb in Yemen considering its undernourished, vulnerable population, with around 12m people needing food assistance. That is why to strengthen the chances of a permanent ceasefire, unrestricted food and medical aid must be allowed to reach all parts of the country so that the sick and the hungry can be cared for. The blockade should be lifted immediately and leading Muslim states need to approach both the Saudis and Iranians to help enforce the truce by convincing their respective Yemeni clients to put down their weapons. If petty geopolitical interests are pursued instead, an even larger disaster awaits the hapless people of Yemen.

A risky proposition

THE coronavirus pandemic has upended social, political and economic routines across the globe. Routine activities that were not too long ago totally kosher have now been suspended as per the requirements of social distancing. Marriages, funerals and all other social events where a large number of people gather have now been cancelled or scaled down to the bare essentials. As for mass worship, most religious institutions around the world, including in Muslim states, have advised believers to pray at home instead of attending places of worship. Pakistan had taken similar steps, with varying degrees of enforcement on the part of the state in various provinces, and adherence by the general public. However, with the month of Ramazan due to start at the end of next week, the matter of mosque attendance is one of urgency. A meeting on Saturday of the president with ulema belonging to different sects sought to address this key issue.

What emerged from the conclave of the clergy and President Arif Alvi is a 20-point 'action plan' that suggests various guidelines for the holy month related to mass gatherings. While the plan has given the green light for taraweeh and congregational prayers, it has also offered some precautions, such as observance of social distancing within mosques, disinfection of masjids etc. Interestingly, the 20th point highlights the fact that the state can "review and change ... its policy if ... the rise in cases was exponential". This point, perhaps, clinches the issue. The fact is that by allowing congregational prayers to go ahead, the state has taken a huge risk. Freedom of worship should be guaranteed, but when the risk of infection is so acute, why take such a questionable decision? Moreover, the prime minister also observed that infections may rise in May. If this is the case, the state should have taken a more firm stance with the clerics.

Moreover, our clergymen need to see what other Muslim states are doing in this situation. Saudi Arabia's grand mufti has said taraweeh and even Eidul Fitr prayers should be offered at home, while Iran's supreme leader earlier said that mass gatherings in Ramazan were unlikely to go ahead. If these two Muslim states — which many believers across the world look to for guidance on religious matters — as well as others such as Egypt and Turkey can take firm decisions on suspension of congregational prayers, what makes our clergymen take such

rigid positions? There is strong evidence that lack of observance of social distancing during religious events — the Tableeghi Jamaat ijtema, for example — has led to a spike in Covid-19 cases. In the face of such facts, the state's decision to allow congregational worship during Ramazan is a matter of concern, and if there is the slightest evidence that cases are shooting up in the aftermath of mass religious gatherings, the government needs to take a firm decision.

Construction package

NOBODY doubts that the construction sector is a job-creating part of the economy and hires more unskilled daily wagers than perhaps any other sector. Equally, nobody doubts that these unskilled daily wagers are the worst hit under the present-day lockdowns. However, the continued focus, via the government's public pronouncements, on the sector at a time when the country is facing a public health emergency has been called into question. Indeed, it is baffling to note the speed at which the government as a whole, in the recent cabinet meeting, moved to pass a far-reaching set of proposals for the construction sector that contain within them an amnesty scheme for whitening black money, as well as key tax incentives that end up promoting speculative activity in the property market.

Whatever arguments one musters in favour of incentives for construction magnates, the discussion could have been left for another time. The scheme, which is being justified by the authorities in the name of helping the poor, may appear to be a positive move to boost the construction sector, but a closer look at the details shows very little effort at targeting the incentives to only benefit low-income housing. Other than a few initiatives, the benefits as a whole will be available to all builders and the construction sector has historically always worked to service elite demand first and foremost. But even more important than the targeting is the loosening of the lockdown terms that is inherent in these incentives. A string of decisions will now need to be made to support the resumption of construction activity, and along with this will come a series of demands from other industries that will claim to be allied to construction beyond cement, steel and fixtures. More than a revival of the economy, this package is likely to lead to a progressive loosening of the strictures around social distancing, since enforcing these on the sites will be difficult, if not impossible. The confusion that this package has created, about what exactly are the state's priorities in the

midst of a public health emergency, as well as the perception that has developed around it that this is a clandestine effort to benefit property developers, is likely to do more harm than good in the days to come. It would be better to postpone the decision for reopening of construction sites for now, and concentrate on measures to contain the virus.

Mental health & Covid-19

HOWEVER high the numbers of coronavirus patients, the pandemic is exacting a mental toll on far more people, and its effects will linger for much longer. Most individuals, to some extent or the other, thrive on social interaction; enforced seclusion is not conducive to emotional health. Compounding the feelings of loneliness is the anxiety over lost livelihoods and the prospect of financial ruin, the fear of infection (asymptomatic spreaders causing the most panic) and of losing loved ones, and, above all, the bleak open-endedness of it. Judging by the figures, Covid-19 has not even come close to peaking in Pakistan. For all the back and forth in official quarters about relaxing the lockdowns or tightening them further, none can predict when this state of siege will be over. There is the pandemic in the present, and ahead of us, a void.

It is a situation that would test the strongest among us, let alone those more vulnerable to depression, paranoia and suicidal tendencies. Indeed, the very real psychological fallout of the pandemic has been recognised, in a manner of speaking, by the Ministry of Human Rights. On Friday, it issued guidelines for people to care for the mental health of others in this historic time. Some of these suggestions include avoiding the association of any race, ethnicity or religion with the virus, not spreading misinformation or stigmatising those who contract Covid-19, and refraining from creating panic. The guidelines include a helpline number that can be called by anyone that suspects someone they know is suffering from any form of abuse or mental illness. These guidelines may be well-intentioned, premised as they are on the understanding that everyone has a right to mental health. However, there should also be an official communiqué, preferably in the form of awareness-raising campaigns about how individuals themselves can nurture their mental health in this stressful period. How do they prevent themselves and their families from sinking into a pit of despair, where they cannot see light at the end of the tunnel?

One of the coping strategies often put forth is avoiding excessive exposure to news of the pandemic — the objective is to be informed, not relentlessly track the spread of the contagion. Moreover, it is advisable to access limited, trusted sources of information. Maintaining social networks through technological tools is critical to sustain the sense of being connected, or ‘in it together’. The government must also underscore its commitment to protecting women and children in violent households, who are all the more at risk when confined with their abusers in a situation replete with multiple triggers. Several people have stepped forward with free counselling, workshops, etc for those finding it difficult to navigate the psychological challenges thrown up by the pandemic. Putting one’s skills to the benefit of others is possibly the best self-therapy for mental health.

A divided region

THE news stories about the never-ending Pakistan-India conflict add a surreal touch to the events dominated by the frightening coronavirus pandemic. The picture of a young child, a life brutally extinguished along the LoC by enemy fire, flashes through the Covid-19 gloom to remind everyone of the other kind of fatal epidemics that human beings themselves are prone to unleashing. The LoC sadly remains a source of bad news at a time when the focus of everyone ought to have been on finding ways to thwart the most dangerous virus in living memory. The pandemic is enough reason for the countries of South Asia to come together. However, formal regional groupings such as Saarc have been left too weak by years of wilful neglect to react positively to any emergency calls for unity. There have in recent times been overtures made for reviving the South Asian alliance and then gradually increasing the tempo of its work to a meaningful level. But for the time being the region appears too divided, with member nations looking outward for international patrons at the cost of nearby friends and essential ties.

That’s a grave mistake. The spread of the virus indicates just how important and interdependent the basic rules of coexistence are, especially in times of trouble and grief. And these principles don’t change even when they are overwhelmed by concepts of domination and an overriding desire for progress at the sheer expense of others. Alliances with others are essential and these alliances must begin locally before they are expanded to outer circles. Closer to home, the

regional circle of cooperation cannot be completed unless ties between the two largest countries in the region, Pakistan and India, are somehow—miraculously—mended. The sabre-rattling on this front these days mocks all sane calls for shifting one's priorities to fighting the real threats to mankind. Skirmishes on the frontiers go on. India-held Kashmir continues to suffer under the oppressor's thumb and no reasonable debate on it is allowed. Both countries have jailed a large number of people, among them many fishermen, for violation of international borders. Their plight has once again been highlighted by the Pakistan-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy. An order for their release now and a pledge for a humane approach to these accidental border crossings in future would amount to a commitment to fighting afflictions with deadly consequences of their own.

The eternal outsiders

ON Friday, officials in Myanmar announced the release of nearly 25,000 prisoners to the applause and relief of their family members. President Win Myint said the purpose behind the largest release of prisoners in the country was “to bring delight to the citizens of Myanmar” on their traditional new year. Just one day earlier, however, 382 Rohingya refugees were rescued by the coast guard of Bangladesh, as they were making their way towards Malaysia. Of which land were they citizens of? Adrift in a tempestuous sea for nearly two months, more than two dozen of them tragically perished on the overcrowded boat, while the remaining survivors were found emaciated. Surely, they too had families who were worried sick for their safety, anxious to hear of some news, perhaps of their freedom? Unfortunately, despite originally hailing from Myanmar's Rakhine state, the Rohingya Muslims have been denied citizenship for decades, and suffer in confinements and camps that have been described over and over again as ‘open air prisons’. They are dehumanised, the target of racial and religious prejudice, and cannot travel freely in their own country of birth, which considers them to be foreigners in their own place of birth.

Since 2017, thousands of Rohingya Muslims have been brutally killed in an army crackdown, while hundreds of thousands fled to other countries, traversing hostile land and water routes to reach their destinations, only to be indefinitely stranded in refugee camps. Last year, officials from Myanmar visited Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh to encourage refugees to begin returning ‘home’

voluntarily — without assuring them of citizenship or making any adjustments to the discriminatory laws that have made their lives unbearable. Not surprisingly, not a single Rohingya Muslim enlisted for the repatriation programme. Myanmar must grant citizenship to its Rohingya population as a first step towards according them basic human rights, dignity and security. And the international community must continue to put pressure on the country to do so.

Smart strategy?

AS the battle against the coronavirus rages on, the federal government has made a fresh proposition to the provinces: to enforce lockdown in only those localities from where new cases are being reported. Invoking the term 'smart lockdown', Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Security Moeed Yusuf said the suggestion builds on the prime minister's view that imposing a blanket lockdown is not a feasible option as it would have serious economic consequences. Essentially, if this smart lockdown is imposed by provincial authorities, restrictions in parts of the country which are deemed 'low risk' areas will be relaxed; but they will remain in place in localities where confirmed Covid-19 cases are high.

The smart lockdown strategy is heavily dependent on two key factors: mass testing and the availability of data. At the moment, Pakistan is testing between 6,500 to 7,500 people per day in a population of over 200m. While the government has pledged to take this figure to 25,000 by the end of the month, it is far too early to make a call about the selective easing of restrictions and deem areas 'low risk'. Given that Pakistan is still in the initial stages of grappling with the virus, the government currently has very little information about infection rates, confirmed cases and future projections that supports the easing of restrictions. In fact, even the limited information that is available clearly shows that the Covid-19 graphs for active cases, daily new cases and daily deaths all indicate a steady rise. Moreover, the figures for the actual number of cases and deaths are likely far higher, as testing is limited and reports of an unusual rise in home deaths in Karachi suggest there may be Covid-19-related fatalities outside of hospitals, as has been the case in other countries. The handful of countries that have started to lift restrictions waited till Covid-19 cases had reached their peak and the curve flattened by strict distancing measures.

In this scenario, the government must continue with the lockdown till patterns for the spread of Covid-19 are well established. Provinces should not jump the gun, imposing a smart lockdown till they have a clear statistical picture of the Covid-19 spread. As they gather this data, authorities must focus on ramping up targeted relief efforts for sections of the public that will face dire economic consequences. A calculation of which areas are 'low risk' at this stage is impossible without contact tracing and mass testing, as those without symptoms can pass the virus to vulnerable people without knowing they are carriers. With the partial lifting of restrictions for certain industries and the continuation of congregational prayers in Ramazan, hospitals must brace themselves for an escalation in the spread of the virus in the coming weeks. The government would do well to allow data, and not panic, to determine its future course of action.

Wrong messaging

AS the government moves to ease the lockdown restrictions, one scene is becoming increasingly familiar: social distancing and coronavirus prevention guidelines are being casually flouted. People can be seen standing close to one another, without masks and touching their faces, apparently unaware of how the coronavirus spreads. From official press conferences to queues outside shops and banks, the situation is no different. The World Health Organisation has time and again repeated how easily the virus that causes Covid-19 can spread: it is mainly transmitted through droplets being generated, not only when an infected person coughs and sneezes but even when they speak. An individual can be infected by breathing in the virus if they are within a few feet of a person who has it. Despite these well-established facts, the importance of practising precautions appears to be lost on many. This attitude towards a virus which has infected thousands of Pakistanis and killed close to 200 — with actual cases likely to be much higher — comes at a high price.

The responsibility to make citizens aware of the easy transmissibility of the virus and preventive measures lies with the government. The federal and provincial authorities must be clear in their messaging — and begin by adopting stringent precautionary measures themselves. Starting with the prime minister, every government official should practise social distancing and wear a mask whenever in public. Not only is this important for their protection, it will also remind members of the public to do the same. Bizarrely, in some photos of officials

wearing surgical masks, the nose is uncovered, defying logic and the very purpose of wearing a protective item. Politicians should not stop at telling people to wash their hands, but must actively engage in an exercise via their high-profile platforms about keeping a distance and wearing a mask. For those who are unable to purchase masks due to their shortage or lack of resources, there are studies which suggest that even homemade cloth masks add a protective layer; plenty of online tutorials show how these can be made. Sending the right message is even more important now, as Ramazan approaches, because mosques will continue to hold congregational prayers. The Karachi commissioner has done well by saying in a notification that face masks are mandatory for anyone leaving home. The government must enforce this and do whatever it takes to inform citizens about the risks they are taking if these measures are ignored.

AQIS cell busted

WHILE the frequency of terrorist attacks in Karachi has come down considerably compared to what it was a few years ago, it would be naïve to assume that militant networks have been permanently neutralised. Proof of this has emerged in the recent arrest of four alleged militants belonging to Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent from the metropolis, which police announced on Sunday. According to law enforcers, the militants were arrested during an operation in the densely populated Gulistan-i-Jauhar area. Weapons were seized from the suspects; the cell was apparently planning to launch terrorist attacks targeting the Pakistan Stock Exchange, City Courts and other public buildings in Karachi.

The law-enforcement agencies must be commended for busting the cell before it could carry out its disastrous agenda, especially at a time when security forces are busy enforcing the lockdown in the province and the rest of the country. The fact is that both militants and violent criminals are well aware of the fact that security men are preoccupied with lockdown-related duties, which is why the security apparatus must continue to keep a watchful eye on such elements to prevent acts of terrorism and mass violence. While most of the planet is in the midst of the battle against Covid-19, violent actors will sense a perfect opportunity to reorganise and carry out acts of terrorism. Therefore, the state must keep two steps ahead of such elements through intelligence-based operations. The threat of jihadi and sectarian terrorism in this country is still

there; the militants are only keeping a low profile and waiting for an 'opportune' time to resume their business of death and destruction. Indeed, law enforcers have their plates full managing law and order and keeping the peace during these volatile times. But it would be unwise for the security forces to not remain vigilant where the terrorist threat is concerned, in order to prevent large-scale attacks. As the arrest of the AQIS men has shown, militants are keeping themselves busy.

Reverse the decision

WITH Pakistan passing the grim milestone of over 10,000 coronavirus cases and more than 200 deaths, there is no time for half measures and missteps. Lockdown fatigue seems to have set in with many people flouting SOPs and safety measures, and ignoring the fact that we are sitting on a time bomb that will detonate unless firm steps are taken immediately.

The battle against Covid-19 must be fought on multiple fronts, but one area where decisive action can be taken without delay is that of congregational prayers. Various provincial administrations had taken differing steps regarding the suspension of congregational prayers in mosques to stop the spread of the contagion, with varying degrees of success. Sindh tried to implement the law in letter and spirit, though there were instances where mobs attacked law enforcers trying to enforce the ban on Friday prayers.

However, at a conclave in Islamabad on Saturday, President Arif Alvi and a collection of clerics belonging to different schools of thought hammered out a 20-point 'action plan' that envisaged reopening of mosques for the public, especially in light of the fasting month, which is due to begin either tomorrow or the day after. Under this scheme, daily and taraweeh congregational prayers would be allowed with a number of 'precautions', though the last point of the plan clearly stated that the restrictions could be put back in place if the number of cases shot up.

The administration, as well as sensible clerics, need to realise that Pakistan cannot afford to take a chance by reopening mosques at this juncture. Attendance at masjids goes up during Ramazan, and it is hard to imagine how the state as well as mosque administrations will enforce social-distancing guidelines. Moreover, in a letter released on Tuesday, some leading doctors of

the country have asked ulema to review the decision on congregational prayers. They point out that indiscipline and contempt for the rules has become part of our national character; therefore, in order to protect public health the decision to open mosques to the public must be reviewed.

Clerics say that social-distancing norms are also being violated in markets. That may be so, and the administration needs to do a better job of ensuring crowding does not take place in bazaars and markets. But the comparison between shopping for food — which is a necessity — and attending congregational prayers — in which there is much flexibility, especially in times of a pandemic — is not a sound one. Even Saudi Arabia has said only a few staff members will be allowed to offer taraweeh prayers at the two holy mosques of Makkah and Madina. If other Muslim states can take sensible decisions, there is no reason why our rulers should be swayed by emotional, ill-informed appeals. For the sake of public health, both the state and ulema need to reverse the decision on congregational prayers.

Virtual parliament

ON the face of it, the opposition has given cogent reasons for rejecting a government plan to hold the next session of the two houses of parliament through video link. The suggestion to hold virtual proceedings was made in view of the prevailing lockdown restrictions on the movement of people and large gatherings in order to halt the spread of Covid-19. However, both the major opposition parties, the PPP and PML-N, argue that the execution of such a proposal would require changes to the Constitution. Additionally, they point out that if the government can frequently hold large cabinet meetings and the courts continue to function without any problem, why shouldn't parliament meet to discuss government policies and legislation, especially those that are related to efforts to control the virus? They also note that virtual sessions are not feasible because of erratic internet connections. Last but not the least, parliament has to meet at least once to make necessary amendments to the rules to create room for virtual sessions. Some from the ruling alliance are also in agreement with the opposition that feels it is possible to hold the pre-budget and budget sessions in the house by implementing the necessary safety measures including social-distancing precautions.

Had the situation in the country been a little less desperate, it would indeed have been hard to dispute the opposition's arguments against convening virtual sessions of parliament. But desperate times demand desperate measures, and those who oppose videoconferencing must rethink their position. In fact, the convening of sessions in parliament will further confuse the people about the severity of the situation as it will negate the opposition's own stance that favours the enforcement of a stricter lockdown to stop the spread of infection. Virtual sessions are perhaps the best option until such time that it is safe to resume normal activities. If there is still insistence on holding a session where lawmakers are present physically in the house, the parties should agree to sending a third of their members to participate, with the rest joining through video link — as an example, Britain successfully experimented with this mode of parliamentary proceedings on Wednesday. Meanwhile, the government needs to realise that the opposition's stand on its proposal stems from the growing trust deficit between the two sides. It is the responsibility of the ruling party to narrow the gap with the opposition for a better working relationship.

Left to suffer

THE Covid-19 pandemic has created a serious dilemma for outpatient departments at public hospitals. These departments were closed down in an effort to contain the spread of the highly contagious infection. This forced shutdown, which continues even in the face of an apex court direction for work to resume in OPDs, has been responsible for delivering some very devastating blows to patients in urgent need of expert medical care. Stories of people suffering, indeed of precious lives being lost because of the absence of timely medical help, have been doing the rounds, some of the most painful amongst them lent credence by making it to newspaper pages. The challenge today is about ideas and material means to defeat the grave pandemic. But whenever the issue of those suffering from health problems other than the coronavirus is discussed, at the centre of attention are the same group of professionals whose selfless services at the forefront of the battle against the contagion have been so widely hailed. They once again hold the key here. The doctors and paramedical staff may have genuine reason for not wanting to leave it to chance at these OPDs, considering that these clinics, which are swarmed by people in their thousands, can be infectious nurseries for the dangerous virus in the best of circumstances.

The times call for desperate measures. Telemedicine has been tried — dubbed as a system for the future in which patients can connect with their doctors via the internet. It is, however, too early for people to efficiently use, let alone trust, telemedicine and it cannot be a substitute for an in-clinic examination in every case. What else can be done to lessen some of the sufferings caused by overcrowded OPDs? Not by any means a revolutionary solution, but private practitioners in various localities should be willing to bear more than their usual share of attending to patients as they may no longer have the option of referring difficult cases to the bigger hospitals.

Stark warning

THERE is palpable alarm among Pakistan's medical community, a sense of foreboding that the country could be on the cusp of an unmanageable crisis. Three times this week, they have urgently asked the government to reconsider its decision to ease lockdown measures. On Wednesday, eminent health experts and representatives of major physicians and surgeons' associations addressed a press conference in Karachi, warning that any laxity in enforcing social distancing now "would prove disastrous" for the country. The day before, around a dozen doctors had written to the government asking it to withdraw its permission for congregational prayers during Ramazan. Yesterday, the Punjab chapter of the Pakistan Medical Association made the same request. On April 22, Pakistan passed the grim milestone of 10,000 Covid-19 cases; the day ended with a total of 10,513 cases, including 224 deaths. One of the doctors at the press conference revealed that as per projections, turning a blind eye to people congregating, whether inside mosques or at markets, could result in 70,000 coronavirus patients by May 15.

Medical professionals are putting their lives on the line each day they come into contact with those infected by the virus, from the initial testing stage and throughout treatment. A single breach in protocol — perhaps an N95 mask reused once too often or an accidental mistake in wearing or removing personal protective equipment — can expose them to the contagion and its consequences. In Spain, healthcare workers comprise 14pc of Covid-19 patients, largely on account of insufficient PPEs for medical staff. In Pakistan, over 160 healthcare providers in Sindh alone have so far tested positive. Sadly, those armed with expertise are not only up against bull-headed ignorance, which is bad

enough, but also deliberate disinformation. The crass allegation by the Punjab chief minister's former spokesman, that the presser in Karachi was held at the PPP's behest, is precisely the kind of cynical 'pandemic politicking' that deflects from the stark warnings by medical personnel.

Pakistan's underfunded health sector is barely able to cope with the regular caseload, let alone an exceptional emergency like the present. If we do not 'flatten the curve' by enforcing a strict lockdown — the only way proven to be effective — the amplified pressure on this creaky edifice could be its undoing. In what may be a sign of things to come, the doctors at the presser said that hospitals in Karachi were running out of beds to cater to Covid-19 patients. Also consider that around 10pc of those infected need respiratory support, but public hospitals in Punjab alone have only 1,245 ventilators — and 77 of them are out of order. With the caseload rising exponentially in the past few weeks, health personnel could be faced with wrenching decisions about which Covid-19 patients to treat with the limited resources available. We are on a knife edge. Listen to the experts.

The primary dilemma

EVEN in more 'normal' times the state of education in this country has left a lot to be desired. But now, with Covid-19 decimating schedules and routines, the education sector in Pakistan is finding it even more difficult to cope. Of course, we are not alone; according to a Unesco count over 1.5bn children the world over have been affected due to school closures caused by the pandemic. Thus the challenge before the education authorities in Pakistan is considerable. Where the higher education sector is concerned, the response to the crisis has been mixed. Some of the more proactive universities have been holding online classes, while many large public-sector tertiary institutions are still scratching their heads, trying to figure out how to proceed. The HEC has issued some SOPs for varsities to follow, but genuine questions about internet access and quality connectivity for students in far-flung areas arise. The situation with the primary and secondary sector is not much different. While many elite private schools are holding classes through apps, most schools have simply given their students an extended break. Here too there are issues of access, as many lower-income children don't have smartphones, tablets and high-speed internet connections that online education tools require.

Considering the strong element of the unknown, provincial education authorities need to plan ahead for the future now. For example, both Sindh and Punjab plan to reopen schools in June. But that deadline should not be considered final, as the coronavirus situation remains extremely fluid. If the closures are extended, the authorities need to figure out how to continue the learning process with maximum children having access. The launch of an educational TV channel by the state is one response; the days ahead will reveal the impact this has had on learning. But beyond the immediate future, those in charge of education policymaking in Pakistan should use this break to analyse the poor teaching and learning outcomes in the country, especially in the public sector and specifically in primary schooling. The sad fact is that around 22m children are not in school in this country; an equally sobering reality is that those in school, particularly government institutions, are not learning much. Experts and stakeholders should use this time to devise ways to reboot Pakistan's education system, and perhaps adapt new methods and technologies — distance learning, studying at home, etc — to bring quality education to every child in this country.

Medicine shortage

PARTS of the country, especially Sindh and KP, are reported to be facing a shortage of a number of life-saving biological products used to treat cancer, angina, diabetes, etc, as well as vaccines for measles, rabies, tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis B. Apparently, the National Control Laboratory has not been processing their certification since March 13. The failure of the government to appoint a new chief federal analyst at the NCL, who signs approvals for such products, is said by pharmaceutical firms to be the reason for the delay in the issuance of the certificates. No importer or manufacturer can market these drugs and vaccines without the NCL's permission. It is indeed mind-boggling to see the government dragging its feet on such an important appointment, thus increasing the risk for critically ill patients who number in the thousands.

It is feared that the disruption in the supply chain of life-saving products and vaccines will trigger a new health crisis alongside Covid-19, which is now spreading fast. This is especially worrying given the fact that the government, in order to divert its resources to Covid-19 patients, has shut down OPDs at public hospitals, which is a precarious situation for people requiring urgent medical treatment. Allowing shortages of life-saving drugs at this time owing to

bureaucratic lethargy is unforgivable. The approval and registration of new products has always been a cumbersome process in Pakistan because of bureaucratic obstacles. The industry has to wait for months — and in some cases years — to obtain permission to market the drugs being used effectively elsewhere in the world. The industry, for example, is awaiting permission to import and market certain new drugs to treat cancer and other serious diseases for the last 14 months, depriving patients of a chance to try new treatments. It is, therefore, necessary for the government to reform the entire process of registration of drugs and issuance of certification of life-saving drugs to ensure the latter's quick and easy availability, especially in desperate times like these.

Financing risk

IT is a sign of how the world has been turned upside down when a credit risk monitoring service like Moody's first notes that Pakistan's fiscal deficit is set to rise to almost 10pc of GDP by the end of this fiscal year, but due to substantial external support that is coming, the financing risk associated with the state has actually decreased. In a statement released on Thursday, Moody's said that "substantial financial support from official-sector creditors reduces Pakistan's financing risks" and added that the debt-to-GDP ratio will climb to 87pc by June, up from 83pc last year. The IMF has forecast that Pakistan's debt to GDP will climb to 90pc by contrast. Either way, it is important to note that debt will be rising sharply in the immediate term, as will the fiscal deficit, while external support will cushion any adverse impact this might have on the country's financials, especially where reserves are concerned.

It is important to be careful when taking stock of this situation because it is easy to see in it cause for celebration. External support is indeed valuable in providing the country with a much-needed cushion to free up resources for the intensifying Covid-19 fight that lies ahead. But there are echoes of previous times that are advising caution as well. Pakistan has repeatedly been through cycles where external support, particularly of the sort that raises the overall debt levels of the country, has furnished fiscal space, and the situation encouraged a certain profligacy and carelessness in how the borrowed resources were handled. It also sparked a tendency among those in power to think that it was their superior management acumen that had opened up this fiscal space.

We now run the risk of falling prey to both tendencies one more time. The government is surrounded by vested interests at the moment demanding tax breaks as well as special incentives to help them weather the lockdowns. Many of these same vested interests are promising that they will not lay off workers during the period their operations are shut, though reports are coming in that this commitment is being breached in many cases. The temptation at a time like this to use all the additional space that is opening up to throw goodies to the billionaires, in the name of reviving growth, bringing in foreign exchange or promoting employment, will be powerful. But it is critical that this temptation be resisted. All the resources of the state must be focused first and foremost on two priorities: helping the poor directly through enhanced social-protection programmes, and ramping up the health sector to meet the challenge. Pakistan's history testifies clearly that in times such as these, vested interests easily hijack the national agenda. That history must not be allowed to repeat itself.

Ramazan prices

WITH the arrival of the fasting month of Ramazan, many a greedy trader in this country will be licking his lips at the prospect of making obscene profits. While the Ramazan price spiral has become an unfortunate annual feature of life in Pakistan, this year, due to the coronavirus and the ensuing lockdowns, a large number of people will find it harder to put food on the iftar table due to the depressing economic situation. As reported in this paper on Friday, vegetable and fruit retailers have jacked up the prices of their produce in Karachi in the run-up to the holy month to make windfall profits. While wholesalers had already increased prices by 20pc to 25pc, many retailers are now charging double the wholesale rates, knowing that fruit is a popular choice during iftar, while vegetables are also essential to the Ramazan spread. Moreover, as bachat bazaars will not be set up this year due to the Covid-19 situation, people will have little choice where shopping for kitchen essentials is concerned, other than the open market.

The state's price monitoring and control mechanism has been feeble in the best of times. But in periods of such crises, effective controls need to be in place to ensure unscrupulous traders are not exploiting the people. Due to the pandemic, with businesses shuttered and the economy battered, the people's buying power has been severely curtailed. The government has tried to address the situation

through Ehsaas payments, while both the state and NGOs have been distributing rations. But despite these interventions, for many middle-class and working people the struggle for survival and providing the bare necessities for their families has become even more difficult. The state must ensure that profiteers, hoarders and other negative forces in the market do not add to the people's miseries during Ramazan, especially in such trying times, by charging prices at will. Regular inspections of markets need to be carried out to ensure that traders are charging notified prices, and that the goods available are of a quality fit for human consumption. Controlling the negative, exploitative forces of the market is indeed a national and ongoing challenge. But during Ramazan families come together at the iftar table to share small blessings in these times of depression and uncertainty. Greedy market forces must not be allowed to snatch these simple joys from people by charging exorbitant rates for produce, foodstuff and kitchen essentials.

Criminalising match-fixing

THE Pakistan Cricket Board's plans to criminalise match-fixing has been widely hailed. The menace took root in Pakistan cricket during the early 1990s and has since been witnessed in several match-fixing and spot-fixing cases involving dozens of cricketers. That has not only blighted the game's credibility but also sullied the country's image. Brilliant players such as Salim Malik, Salman Butt, Mohammad Amir, Mohammad Asif, Nasir Jamshed and others have fallen prey to the fixing menace and have been given harsh punishments. However, there have been scores of fixing incidents involving players, both at the domestic and international levels, who have escaped penalties, primarily due to want of evidence and lack of witnesses. PCB chairman Ehsan Mani has admitted that the board does not currently have the legal authority to tackle match-fixing while it is beyond its resources to follow the money trail every time such a case is reported. The PCB, he says, is left with no choice but to make match-fixing a criminal offence, as done by New Zealand, Australia and Sri Lanka over the years.

It is, indeed, a welcome move on the PCB's part. But having said that, many former players and critics have rightly expressed reservations. They ask if the PCB will bring all culprits to book, or pick and choose, as done previously, allowing the big fish to dodge the net. It is no secret that Pakistan's much-trumpeted inquiry into match-fixing in 2000 by the Justice Qayyum Commission

spared many a fixing culprit, letting them get away with a note of reprimand and a fine, and handing a life ban to just one player, batsman Salim Malik. Such cosmetic actions for a major offence like match-fixing are lamentable, and have done little to curb the menace or discourage players; they have, in fact, resulted in repeated incidents of match-fixing in Pakistan cricket. The PCB would be well advised to approach the government for criminalising match-fixing so that the despicable practice ends once and for all.

Model courts

MODEL courts, established for the purpose of swift disposal of cases, have awarded the death sentence — a punishment strongly opposed by this paper — to 874 people while handing down life imprisonment to 2,616 criminals during the period April 1, 2019, to March 30, 2020. These statistics are part of a one-year performance report issued by the director general of model courts of Pakistan. These forums for justice were established on the orders of the former chief justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa and were aimed at reducing the massive pendency of cases in the judicial system. Burdened by repeated adjournments, it is normal for cases in Pakistan to drag on for long periods of time, sometimes up to nearly 25 years. The model courts operate without adjournments and finish murder trials within a month. Other cases are also disposed of within a short period of time. Presently, there are 442 model courts in the country across all provinces. The report issued by the director general details the number of cases completed, number of testimonies heard and a slew of other statistics that point towards significant work having been done in a year's time.

However, concerns exist. Some lawyers and judges associated with these courts have expressed uneasiness with conducting non-stop proceedings without any adjournments. While much of this unease may be due to the added pressure that comes with daily hearings, some of it may reflect larger concerns about compromising on the quality of justice if it is rushed for procedural reasons. This is an important issue that requires close scrutiny by the superior courts. Speedy justice is fine — especially in a system like ours that sags under the weight of delays — but equally if not more important is the risk of the miscarriage of justice. This becomes all the more critical if it translates into the guilty walking free and the innocent going to prison. According to a report by a UK-based NGO that was presented to the government of Pakistan last year, more than 78pc of the death

sentences handed down by the lower courts of Pakistan were overturned by the Supreme Court. In and of itself this figure is a testament to the poor quality of justice being delivered in these courts. The Supreme Court overturns many sentences usually because the prosecution case was based on faulty evidence, or the witness testimonies were unreliable or the FIRs were erroneous procedurally and otherwise.

Given such a state of affairs, rushed proceedings can generate a sense of dread. The intent behind the model courts makes eminent sense but much more needs to be done before this intent can translate into deliverable outcomes that are credible, transparent and fulfil all requirements of justice. The Supreme Court may want to monitor these courts more closely in order to inject improvements both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Local transmission

THE threat from the novel coronavirus is increasing as Pakistan's curve rapidly follows an upward trajectory. By Saturday, the number of confirmed cases had crossed 12,500, while over 260 fatalities have been recorded since the country registered its first case in late February. Worryingly, the authorities indicated that the vast majority of cases — some 80pc — have been caused by the 'local transmission' of the coronavirus — a term used to describe the situation where a person who has not recently travelled overseas or come into contact with a confirmed Covid-19 patient is infected by the virus. In the initial days of the pandemic, authorities had reported a high number of confirmed cases among travellers returning from coronavirus hotspots such as Iran and the UK and had focused their efforts on isolating, testing and quarantining those individuals. Today, as evidenced by local transmission figures, that trend has changed.

The sharp increase in local transmissions is alarming and points to an unsettling reality — that the number of unconfirmed Covid-19 cases is high, and that these individuals, some of whom are asymptomatic, are infecting others as they move about in their homes, neighbourhoods, etc. The high local transmission rate follows the dangerous trend in countries like Italy and the UK, where mass community spread propelled the curve and death rate upwards, and in turn caused the virus to spread in hospitals, often affecting the medical staff. Given the country's limited healthcare infrastructure, Pakistan simply cannot afford to

allow community spread to continue. At this rate, not only will the virus sweep into hospitals and cripple the capacity of healthcare staff, it will also unleash death and misery in parts of the country which are densely populated, especially where large families reside in small homes. In these circumstances, it is imperative that both the federal and provincial governments re-evaluate the relaxation they have given to citizens after a few weeks of lockdown. The Sindh government has taken a brave and practical step by restricting congregational prayers during Ramazan. Other provinces and the federation should follow its example. As efforts are made to build up the country's track-and-trace capacity and implement a strategy, it is unwise to relax lockdown restrictions and allow crowds to gather in markets or mosques. While allowing congregational prayers despite the Covid-19 threat, the prime minister indicated that the government may change the rules if coronavirus cases escalate. The numbers suggest that that time has come.

Blaming women

WELL-KNOWN cleric Maulana Tariq Jameel has made a disturbing assertion that Covid-19 has been unleashed on humanity because of the 'wrongdoing of women'. During a televised prayer, the maulana condemned women for dancing and for how they dress, saying these "immodest actions" have brought the Almighty's wrath upon the country.

These misogynistic remarks were made during the Ehsaas Telethon fundraising event, in the presence of the prime minister and top broadcast journalists.

In the same prayer, the maulana also cast aspersions on the media for "disseminating lies", but later apologised for that particular remark on account of having "spoken too much". No such apology was made for his offensive comments about women.

For the maulana to claim that women should be blamed for a global pandemic is not just ill-informed but also inflammatory. The statements are troubling; not only do they betray a deep-rooted misogyny, they were also aired, unchallenged, from a very high-profile platform.

This mentality is reflective of society's unfortunate tendency to marginalise women simply because social power structures allow them to be viewed as

'lesser beings'. The remarks also reinforce a dangerous yet normalised idea that targeting women is permissible.

The reality is that women in Pakistan, and elsewhere, face systemic discrimination and violence. During this pandemic, domestic abuse cases have soared as women are forced to stay home for extended periods with their tormentors. Despite these challenges, women strive to be recognised and shatter glass ceilings — as evidenced by the effective response of global women leaders in this pandemic.

Given that the ruling PTI is lauded for its inclusion of women in political rallies and for celebrating their lively participation, it is a shame that the maulana was not corrected when he made these offensive comments.

Later, however, Minister for Human Rights Shireen Mazari, without directly naming the maulana, rightly criticised such thinking as ludicrous and ignorant. The maulana must apologise for his unsavoury remarks, and accept that while prayers are always welcome, the nation can do without scorn and misguided views.

India's Muslims

FOR Muslims in India, the situation appears to be deteriorating by the day. Indeed, things were never going to be easy for the community under BJP rule, considering that the RSS — the BJP's ideological parent — had never accepted Muslims as 'true' Indians, and peddled the myth that the community comprised permanent outsiders. This despite the fact that Muslims can trace their roots in the subcontinent as far back as a millennium. Under the Narendra Modi dispensation, Muslims have been pushed to the fringes of society, as Nehruvian/Gandhian secularism has been dumped in favour of a muscular, toxic Hindutva narrative. Unfortunately, as the Covid-19 pandemic rages across the planet, the situation for Indian Muslims has become even more dire, as elements within the Indian establishment and media attempt to blame the infection's spread on the community. This has had devastating consequences for India's Muslims.

Mistakes may well have been made by Indian members of the Tableeghi Jamaat — which has its headquarters in New Delhi — but to blame the spread of Covid-

19 on the entire Indian Muslim community is unacceptable. Moreover, those pointing their finger at Tableeghi preachers for holding a congregation after preventive measures were put in place conveniently skip the fact that the UP chief minister — a rabid Hindu priest — also held a religious gathering in Ayodhya the day the lockdown went into effect. Regrettably, facts and common sense matter little in today's India, as a populist media and rabble-rousers within the political establishment have found a golden opportunity to pillory Muslims. There have been boycotts of Muslim traders, Muslim patients have been denied admission to hospitals, while two babies reportedly died as hospitals refused to treat their mothers on the basis of faith. But the Hindutva state remains unmoved as millions of people in India are disenfranchised by a violent, majoritarian narrative. Courageous non-Muslim Indians who raise a voice against these injustices are hounded by the Hindutva establishment, with bogus cases filed against them to snuff out dissent.

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi hit the target when she said the BJP was spreading the “virus of communal prejudice” while Pakistan's Foreign Office has rightly said Indian Muslims face violence and exclusion in the midst of a pandemic. Of course, in times of crises people's biases come out. Indian Muslims provide an easy target for the shock troops of the Sangh Parivar, as the saffron brigade has been emboldened by state support. The colonial lockdown of India-held Kashmir; the exclusionary legislation designed to disenfranchise Muslims, and now, the spurious allegations of ‘corona jihad’, are all part of a sick pattern to strip Indian Muslims of their rights. It appears that the comparisons between Nazi Germany and Hindutva India are quite apt. The champions of democracy and human rights in the world must speak up before the ogre of Hindutva devours the Indian Muslim community.

Track and trace'

THERE seems no doubt that state authorities see the threat posed by the spreading Covid-19 contagion as serious in the extreme, indeed one that is on par with national security imperatives. Prime Minister Imran Khan revealed during a telethon on Thursday that in order to reinforce the efforts against the pandemic, the ISI has given the government access to the track and trace technology it employs in its anti-terrorism operations. Mr Khan, who earlier in the day had

been given a briefing at the intelligence agency's headquarters, said the system would enable computer tracking of coronavirus patients.

The public health crisis engulfing the country is undeniably grave. However, there will be a time after Covid-19, and the prime minister's rather casual disclosure on live TV belies the profound and conceivably long-term ramifications of using this technology as a pandemic-fighting measure. Unless appropriate safeguards are instituted, employing a system used for hunting down terrorists to target possible coronavirus patients is a disturbing new trajectory. Fundamental rights are often sacrificed at the altar of fighting militancy, and the approach is unlikely to be different when the same tools are being deployed against the contagion. History is replete with instances where emergency situations have been seized upon by states to justify and then normalise extraordinary measures. Moreover, a captive citizenry can be manipulated into 'willingly' ceding its personal freedoms on one pretext or another. That leeway can be used to cast the net wider and more expediently. Today, it may be possible Covid-19 patients; tomorrow, tax evaders; after that, political opponents may become the target — in short, this could be the slippery slope to an authoritarian state. As it is, no legislation for personal data protection has yet been enacted in Pakistan, even though it is sorely needed. Unlike traditional human intelligence, modern technology enables the monitoring of citizens around the clock. Countries like China have successfully used invasive mobile tracking and mass surveillance tools such as facial recognition cameras to corral suspected coronavirus cases, and everyone with whom these individuals have come in contact. There is no word yet on what the intelligence agency's 'track and trace' system entails. However, there must be more transparency on this score: the people have a right to know the extent to which their privacy is being compromised. The government should also guarantee that after this crisis is over, the intelligence technology will revert to its originally intended use.

Empty stomachs

AS if the present state of affairs around the world were not already near-apocalyptic, the World Food Programme has now warned that the novel coronavirus pandemic could lead to multiple famines — “of biblical proportions” — with those living in conflict zones most vulnerable to hunger and starvation. Last week, the WFP released its fourth annual report on global hunger. Amongst

other startling revelations, the report stated that approximately 135m people faced acute food insecurity in the preceding year (2019), while another 183m were precariously standing on the edge of disaster, at risk of falling over and plunging into severe food shortages, if pushed by a major economic or environmental stressor. This year, however, the WFP has said that these figures could potentially double, as the rapid spread of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns in major cities around the world takes a toll on the global economy and food supply chains. Unless urgent interventions are effectively put in place and enacted by governments around the world, we could soon be witnessing scenes of mass human misery and political and social unrest, particularly in developing countries. Earlier this month, the heads of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation and the World Trade Organisation too had warned of looming food shortages and rioting if governments do not act quickly to avert the situation. Already, food riots have erupted in parts of South Africa, Nigeria and India. Italy, too, had to deploy thousands of soldiers in its southern parts, fearing food rioting and crime would grow out of control amidst a strict lockdown.

In Pakistan, grotesque social inequalities have been further exacerbated in these difficult times, and there is fear and anxiety that hunger will soon set in, particularly felt by daily wage earners who are most severely affected by the lockdown. While there is no way of saying just how long the present situation will continue, no matter what decisions are taken under these circumstances, someone or the other will suffer.

Weak virus strategy

PAKISTAN'S coronavirus figures are becoming more worrying with each passing day. The graph depicting confirmed cases is at a sharper incline as compared with previous weeks. The daily death rate, too, is increasing, with 16 Covid-19-related fatalities reported across the country on Sunday alone. There is little doubt that the government understands the scale of the problem. From the prime minister and his key health adviser to senior officials, most are well aware that the coronavirus threat is growing in the country and have expressed this apprehension at several public forums. Additionally, health officials have sounded the alarm about the number of asymptomatic individuals testing positive. Yet, despite the writing on the wall and clear indications that the

situation will soon become very difficult, the government's approach remains unassertive. Lockdown measures in most cities have been eased. In some areas, the scenes at bazaars and in mosques are reminiscent of any other day in the pre-Covid-19 era. Overall, the atmosphere of urgency and caution which was palpable in the initial lockdown days is dissipating. The scenario raises a serious question: what is the government's strategy?

Prime Minister Imran Khan has been against any iteration of a lockdown from the very first day. The premier has unequivocally said that the country cannot afford to lock down due to dire economic consequences and has appealed to citizens to be responsible in practising distancing measures. Yet, even when it came to congregational prayers in Ramazan — which have little connection with the economic situation — Mr Khan said: "We knew that people will definitely go to the mosques even after the government stops them by force." A similar rationale was applied by President Arif Alvi, when he met members of the clergy and formulated distancing SOPs for congregational prayers. Unfortunately, this appeal has been largely unsuccessful. A survey has revealed that 80pc of mosques in Punjab and the federal capital are not implementing the agreement reached between the government and ulema. Observers conducting the survey noted that worshippers in 194 mosques violated preventive measures.

The experiment has failed and begs a reassessment. For the government to rely on the notion of individual citizen responsibility, it must confront an unfortunate reality: the Swedish model of self-regulation, if successful, is only possible because it relies on the notion of trust between citizens and state — a historical rarity in Pakistan and in many other countries. The crowds in public spaces are evidence that the government's appeals have not been taken seriously. Therefore, the government must rethink its strategy and impose stringent restrictions even as it ramps up testing to the promised 25,000 a day — a target it is yet to meet. The approach of 'advice giving' must be abandoned. Instead, the government ought to exercise its constitutional authority to protect the public before it is too late.

Sugar audit

THE special inquiry commission on sugar, which was constituted earlier this month to conduct a detailed forensic audit of nine companies, is being given another three weeks to do its job.

The commission, which was formed to look into manipulation of the domestic sugar market by producers, was supposed to submit its forensic report on April 25.

But it has sought more time because it is finding it difficult to hire people with the required expertise to carry out a forensic audit of the sugar business, as well as owing to the closure of factories in compliance with lockdown rules.

This was expected ever since the formation of the commission which many observers argued had been given very little time to undertake a very technical exercise.

Most were doubtful of the commission's capacity to perform a forensic audit as the earlier inquiry report prepared by the FIA team had betrayed the investigators' unfamiliarity with the way the sugar or any other business is conducted and how the markets function in countries like Pakistan.

Although the inquiry committee was able to put together a good industry report after weeks of hard work, its findings remained inconclusive owing to its lack of technical expertise.

For example, the investigators equated future contracts with satta, a form of speculative investment usually considered akin to gambling.

Thus, it is advisable for the commission to use the services of experts who are trained for carrying out such studies even if it requires another extension to the life of the commission.

It is important for the government and investigators to produce a scientifically credible report as the mill owners have already raised serious objections, some valid, to the earlier one on the basis of which the forensic audit has been ordered.

Moreover, the PTI's Jahangir Khan Tareen, whose six mills are part of the nine firms selected for the forensic analysis, has also expressed his fears that someone in the bureaucracy might be targeting him and his business interests for political reasons.

Indeed, the sugar mill owners, most of whom either belong to a major political party or are closely related to influential politicians, exercise much clout over the policymaking process.

But a great deal of their political influence is firmly rooted in the sugar policy pursued by successive governments to please big farmers.

The commission must also examine the role of sugar policy in helping millers and distributors manipulate the market to rig profits.

Saudi human rights

TWO recent changes to the Saudi legal system point to the fact that the ultra-conservative desert kingdom is slowly taking steps to bring its laws in line with international human rights principles. The Saudi supreme court had over the weekend announced that convicts would no longer be flogged; the punishment has been meted out to people for a range of crimes. Another development quotes the country's Human Rights Commission as saying that capital punishment will no longer be given to those convicted of committing crimes while they were minors. While observers would be right in asking what took the Saudis so long, considering the kingdom's peculiar history and austere mores, this is progress nonetheless. The Saudi apex court was quoted as saying that the moves are part of "human rights advances" as per the vision of King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed, the real power behind the throne.

It is a fact that since his father ascended the throne in 2015, the crown prince has been trying to 'remake' Saudi Arabia as a nation for the modern era, shedding the austere Wahabi codes his own forebears put in place. This has included giving women the right to drive, loosening gender segregation and allowing international entertainment events. Even a decade ago, most of these things would have been unthinkable in Saudi Arabia. But the march to 'progress' also has a darker side, with Mohammed bin Salman accused of ruthlessly weeding out any dissent to his rule. Indeed, the crown prince has not even spared some

of his closest relatives — blue-blooded members of the House of Saud — in his quest for ‘accountability’. Legal and social reforms will be meaningless unless there is freedom of speech and expression in the kingdom; currently, even the vaguest criticism of the crown can land Saudis in hot water. Perhaps slain journalist Jamal Khashoggi is the most well-known victim of this ruthlessness. The legal changes are great, but there remains much to do before common Saudis can breathe freely.

Provincial autonomy

A RECENT comment by the federal planning minister describing the 18th Amendment as flawed has sparked a new debate between the supporters of a powerful centre and those who want stronger federating units for a fairer, more effective federal system.

Although the minister indicated that the PTI government did not plan to clip the provinces’ administrative and financial powers, his words have elicited a strong reaction from the opposition parties in defence of hard-won provincial rights.

The amendment, which was forged through consensus a decade back, not only transferred greater administrative and fiscal authority to the provinces, but also gave more powers to parliament.

That the opposition felt the need to rebut the government’s view despite the ruling elite lacking the parliamentary majority to reverse the devolution process set in motion by the 18th Amendment, shows the growing trust gap between the two sides.

At one end is the fear that provincial autonomy could be eroded while at the other, there is the concern that the amendment, as well as the seventh National Finance Commission award, have administratively and financially weakened the centre by delegating too many legislative powers to the provinces and diverting a larger portion of fiscal resources to them.

The debate over greater administrative and financial autonomy allowed to the provinces under the amendment and the seventh NFC award is intensified every time the centre ruled by one political party finds it difficult to control and dictate a province governed by another.

One of the main reasons for this acrimony stems from the fact that the platform of the Council of Common Interests is hardly used to resolve issues between the centre and the provinces.

Further, there is a need to realise that the financial problems faced by the federal government have little to do with the increase in the provincial share from the federal tax divisible pool under the NFC award.

The fault lies with the centre because it has failed to broaden the tax base and collection as projected in the award or to cut its expenditure.

How can the provinces be blamed if the central government has continued to borrow heavily at higher interest rates to finance the functions it otherwise should have discarded after their devolution to the federating units?

The claim that provincial finances have grown exponentially under the NFC award is also debatable.

Indeed, the provinces are getting greater federal transfers from the divisible pool, but federal policies are responsible for adding drastically to their current expenditure such as their salary bills.

So it is advisable for the centre to look at all aspects of the debate before blaming the units for its troubles.

Similarly, the provinces also need to ramp up their expenditure on health, clean drinking water, sanitation, education, etc to prepare themselves for any future health crisis instead of looking towards federal support in such times.

Yemen secession

WITH the declaration of self-rule by separatists in southern Yemen — a de facto secession — the situation in the war-torn country is set to deteriorate further. Already Yemen had been battered by five years of conflict, as the Saudi-led intervention on behalf of the government to dislodge the Iran-allied Houthis, who control the capital Sana'a, has turned the poverty-stricken country into a wreck. The Southern Transitional Council has broken away from the Mansour Hadi-led government as it claims the administration was 'conspiring' against its cause.

The UN's special envoy for the region has sounded the alarm, indicating the fact that the development bodes ill for the country.

Differences between the southern and northern regions of Yemen are not new and go back decades. In fact, until the 1990 reunification of the country, it was divided into North Yemen and the Marxist South, with its capital at Aden. Even after reunification, things were less than perfect as a number of attempts were made by the southerners to secede, only to be crushed by the late Yemeni strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh. In the current scenario, the Yemeni theatre has become incredibly complicated. While the battle between the Houthis and the Mansour Hadi regime is seen as another front in the contest for regional domination between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the southern secession exposes fissures within allies. While Mansour Hadi is a Saudi protégé, the STC is largely seen as a client of the UAE; both the Saudis and Emiratis are part of the anti-Houthi coalition. This sets the stage for a very ugly war of all against all, unless saner counsel prevails. To add to this incendiary mix, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is believed to have a strong base in Yemen, while the country also hosts a 'province' of the dreaded Islamic State group. To prevent a descent into total anarchy, the Saudi-led coalition needs to set its own house in order, for if there are rifts within the alliance, the Houthis are unlikely to negotiate with a house divided. Moreover, if factional fighting extends to all of Yemen, the aforementioned terrorist groups will find an opportune moment to pounce and grab more territory. All these scenarios present a terrifying picture for the hungry, sick and battered people of Yemen. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi need to rein in their respective clients, or else a negotiated end to the Yemeni imbroglio anytime soon is unlikely.

Sana Mir retires

PAKISTAN'S celebrated woman cricketer Sana Mir has called it a day after a 15-year-long distinguished career. An inspirational figure, Sana's outstanding achievements on the field and impeccable conduct off it have earned her universal respect and made her one of Pakistan's finest ambassadors. Indeed, a golden chapter has come to a close with her departure from the international scene. Since her debut in 2005, Sana earned a reputation as a fierce competitor and later made great strides in the game. In 2008, she was named Player of the Tournament in the Women's World Cup Qualifiers and in 2009 she was asked to

lead the national women's cricket team. The all-rounder's performances have been the cornerstone of the team's success internationally. She led her side to gold medal wins in the 2010 and 2014 Asian Games, and became the first woman player to complete 100 wickets in international cricket, crowning her career with the top spot in the women's ODI rankings in 2018.

However, more importantly, Sana broke down barriers to excel in an environment that would have deterred lesser beings. For someone who started her cricket in the streets, she had to tackle many challenges on her way to glory. Lack of training venues, poor media coverage, sponsors' snubs and above all societal criticism, Sana has seen it all. That she made her mark despite these setbacks makes her a role model for hundreds of young players including current captain Bismah Maroof, Aliya Riaz, Javeria Wadood, Kainat Imtiaz, Nahida Khan, Nida Dar, Sidra Nawaz, Diana Baig and others who form a competitive women's cricket unit today. Tributes have poured in from across the world for Sana, including from the ICC and neighbouring India. Her peers have generously acknowledged her feats as well as the culture of teamwork and discipline that she inculcated in the team. The Pakistan Cricket Board should honour Sana Mir's services to women's cricket and utilise her experience and expertise for the betterment of the game.

A troubling trend

EARLIER this month, the federal government announced that it would ramp up Pakistan's Covid-19 testing capacity to conduct 25,000 tests per day by April end. It is therefore disturbing to note that not only are we nowhere near achieving this target, but that the number of tests being done per day has declined in the past week in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and the Islamabad Capital Territory. While the PPP's Nafisa Shah speculated that the reduced rate of testing may be politically motivated, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Dr Zafar Mirza said in an interview that testing would increase significantly once the federal government's test, track and quarantine policy is implemented. However, the absence of a definitive explanation for missing this target does not augur well, and Dr Mirza's suggestion that tests may be declining due to fewer suspected cases betrays a degree of complacency in the federal government's handling of the crisis. Each day that Pakistan isn't pushing its testing capacity to the limit increases the risk of the situation spiralling out of control, as even

asymptomatic carriers can spread the virus to others, with major consequences for both lives and livelihoods.

Time — hard-bought with myriad collective and individual sacrifices made under lockdown — cannot be squandered. We must move past this phase, but in order to do so policymakers urgently need an accurate picture of the issue to prevent a rush on our already overburdened healthcare systems. The politicised nature of the lockdown debate has distracted from a key issue — intensive ramping up of testing and critical care capacity in order to gradually reopen the economy. Countries that implemented early lockdowns with effective messaging and mass compliance, in addition to scaling up their national health response, especially testing, are now beginning to ease restrictions. Those that botched both or either of these measures are seeing hundreds of patients die each day. There is little evidence to suggest that Pakistan would be an outlier to this trend.

While we cannot build an exceptional healthcare system overnight, we can and must improve our testing capacity. A few examples of small-scale universal testing at private organisations not only indicate a high rate of infection but also show that most people were unsuspecting carriers. The extent to which public policymakers can base conclusions on these data sets is limited, but the fact that the country on the whole has been unable to intensively scale up testing in the past few weeks is a serious handicap. Our public health experts argue that the current official figures represent only the tip of the iceberg. We are nowhere near testing enough of our population to see the peak of the curve, let alone flatten it. However, as Dr Mirza himself noted, perhaps a more reliable indicator would be to look at death rates, which no rhetoric can obscure. It is growing.

Extremism in India

THE extremist Hindutva clique that calls the shots in India has largely been able to get away with its atrocious treatment of Indian Muslims because powerful voices in the world have remained silent in the face of this oppression. But this may be changing as voices are finally being raised against the BJP-RSS combine's anti-Muslim proclivities. Though Pakistan has long been warning the world against India's brutal treatment of Kashmiris as well as of Indian citizens, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has urged the OIC to take a firm stand against New Delhi's rogue behaviour. In a tweet, Mr Qureshi urged members of

the multilateral Muslim body to “unite in global condemnation of these inhuman attacks”, referring to the ostracism Indian Muslims have had to face in the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak. Earlier, the general secretariat of the Kuwaiti Council of Ministers also called upon the OIC to take “necessary and urgent measures” to help protect Indian Muslims. But perhaps the most stinging criticism has come from the US, which the Modi regime constantly courts economically and politically. In its recently released annual report, the US Commission for International Religious Freedom — a bipartisan body backed by the American government — says India has “tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom”. Particularly, the commission’s vice-president says India’s new citizenship legislation “potentially exposes millions of Muslims to detention, deportation and statelessness”.

The world may have been late in reacting to India’s abetment of anti-Muslim terror, but it is positive to note that the global community is finally speaking up. For some time now, Sangh Parivar gangs have terrorised Muslims, be it due to allegations of eating beef, being ‘anti-national’ or spurious claims of spreading the coronavirus in India. The nightmare in India-held Kashmir, meanwhile, has been amplified due to the inhuman months-long lockdown enforced by the Indian military machine. The Muslim world — represented by the OIC — has largely remained quiet, or given lukewarm rebukes to India aside from a few notable exceptions. Moreover, the US and Europe — who are quick to pillory geopolitical adversaries over alleged rights abuses, but treat allies and trading partners with kid gloves — have also remained largely quiet, despite their self-professed dedication to fundamental rights. However, the ‘world’s largest democracy’ now stands exposed before the global community for its anti-Muslim agenda. It is time the world moved beyond words to take concrete steps to make India change its communal behaviour.

Childhood immunisation

THE spread of Covid-19 with all its troubling implications has led governments and world bodies to undertake damage-assessment exercises in various spheres of life. The challenge for the rest of the health sector alone is immense, with medical experts warning of perils ahead as the near-total focus on the coronavirus has thrown up difficult questions. Taking stock of the situation, Unicef has pointed out how countries in South Asia specifically have missed

childhood vaccination targets as a result of the lockdowns. For instance, in Pakistan, one of the few remaining reservoirs of the polio virus, an already suffering vaccination campaign against the debilitating disease has been further weakened. Unicef has reported sporadic outbreaks of preventable diseases such as measles and diphtheria in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The agency's latest reminder during World Immunisation Week should propel the authorities into immediate action. True, it is a source of further tension for a country not known for giving the best deal to its children. But delaying immunisation can have its own, lethal, consequences. And although parental awareness regarding the absolute necessity of childhood vaccination has increased, extra effort is required from the government and those on the front lines of the war against the virus ie the medical corps, to not let attention be diverted from the need to protect children. Together, they must find ways to facilitate access to other medical services even in the midst of the pandemic.

Vaccination is a crucial area as are other medical cases requiring urgent care; the latter have been piling up for weeks now. A short-term solution might have to entail a cautious opening up of selected healthcare facilities other than emergency wards and special Covid-19 units. In the long run, the authorities might want to encourage visits to community doctors advising parents and administering the required vaccines to their children. Millions of children around the world have already been left out of vaccination programmes. Many more will be added to their numbers if the focus remains on a single emergency.