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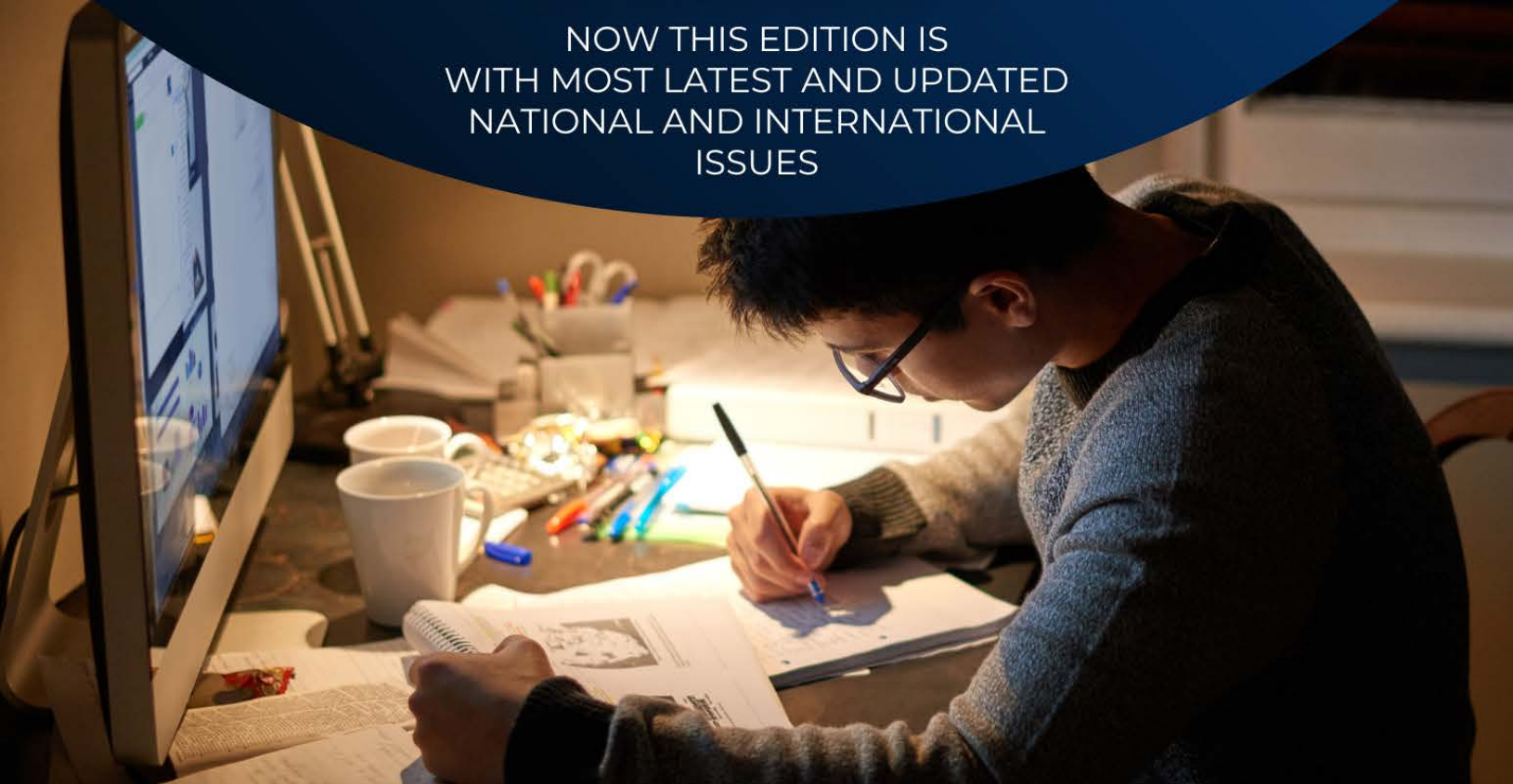
MONTHLY

DAWN

EDITORIALS

APRIL 2024

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Family sins

INCEST is not a mere violation. Perpetrated and covered up by family for 'family honour', it is a horrific crime that mauls a young life and turns homes into a place of abuse, sometimes leading to teen suicides. Pakistan, tragically, is no stranger to the sickness: the tormented lives of minors have been uncovered frequently. In 2021, Kasur police arrested a man for raping his daughter; she stated that she complained to relatives but they stayed silent. Early last year, Pakistanis breathed fire at a university lecturer who had set an exam paper that included a question about incest. The same year, a 14-year-old girl in Lahore killed her father for raping her multiple times for months. Last week, the body of a girl in Toba Tek Singh was exhumed for autopsy due to suspicions of incest by her brother and father; she was allegedly pregnant. A gruesome video of her murder — featuring the accused — went viral on social media amid public outrage.

These are hidden victims forced to wear a shroud of silence, while their violators are either around them or have easy access to them. So much so, that, reportedly 60pc to 70pc of such incidents go unreported, because the child cannot admit to incestuous abuse. On disclosure, adults advise secrecy. According to a WAR report in 2021, the most frequently reported abuse cases are of incest; almost 60pc minors subjected to sexual abuse are victims of incest in Pakistan. The path to justice requires a drastic overhaul, with a sensitised legal fraternity and thana settings, so that advocates are not shy of taking up incest cases and families are not asked to drop charges. Moreover, increased state support is needed for mothers to report sick-minded family members. In this criminal set-up, an abuser's actions are normalised for the child as is silence for the mother. The stigma must be erased, with fewer procedural and societal hurdles.

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Biden's letter

IT seems as though the US government finally wants to give Islamabad a chance. On Friday, US President Joe Biden wrote to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to communicate that Washington continues to stand with Pakistan "to

tackle the most pressing global and regional challenges of our time”. Though quite a few observers noted that the letter itself seemed rather anodyne, others saw it as a major breakthrough considering that the American presidency, ever since it passed from Donald Trump, had avoided engaging directly with Pakistan’s civilian leadership thus far. A good relationship with Washington has been the cornerstone of Pakistan’s foreign policy for decades now, so the American president’s refusal to talk to former prime minister Imran Khan had set off alarm bells in diplomatic circles. Things seemed to have soured considerably after the US forces’ messy withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Pakistani government’s decision to maintain a non-aligned stance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict didn’t help. The ‘ciphergate’ saga, involving a senior State Department official, Donald Lu, only complicated matters. However, the White House has now signalled that it may be ready to move on.

But the contents of the letter also make it clear that Islamabad should not get its hopes up. The letter avoids talking about any of the most pressing crises being faced by Pakistan, which makes it evident that Washington may no longer be as willing to get involved with Pakistan as it once was. It says that it is interested in helping out with climate change and human rights-related issues, education and health, and contributing to Pakistan’s economic growth, but where problems like economic aid, security and political instability are concerned, it seems Islamabad will be on its own for now. Importantly, Mr Biden has avoided congratulating Prime Minister Sharif on his election or acknowledging the political turmoil that followed February’s general election, which suggests that Washington wants to maintain a safe distance. There is also the fact that this letter may be too little, too late. Mr Biden may not be around for too long: the US presidential election is slated to be held on Nov 5, 2024, and his main rival, Donald Trump, seems well-poised for a comeback. Whatever the case may be, it appears that Pakistan has little choice but to take baby steps forward.

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Government support?

FINANCE MINISTER Muhammad Aurangzeb wants to conclude a larger, medium-term deal with the IMF before the current fiscal year is out. He is also hopeful of getting to the finish line in time. Speaking to reporters at the PSX on

Friday, he expressed hopes of reaching a staff-level agreement for the new programme with the Fund by end FY24.

According to him, the lender has been “very receptive” to Pakistan’s request for a larger programme in recent communications. While there was no final decision yet, he said, “it is our desire that by the time we wrap up this fiscal year an [agreement] is reached”. He has repeatedly argued that Pakistan requires IMF discipline for at least the next three years to “execute” the long-delayed structural changes in the economy.

Apparently, the finance minister has also earned the goodwill of the lender, and the upcoming talks on the new programme on the margins of the spring meetings of the Bretton Woods institutions will, hopefully, pave the way for early finalisation of the new loan programme.

At a time when the minister needs the government’s full backing to pull off the crucial deal and implement tough economic reforms over the next several years, it seems that some circles are trying to undermine his role in the cabinet. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s decision to name Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar to the all-important Council of Common Interests and keep Mr Aurangzeb out of it looks like an attempt to contain his role in decision-making.

Sadly, this was not the only occasion, since the formation of the new government a month ago, that he has been sidelined. Some days ago, Mr Sharif, in a break from tradition, decided to chair the ECC, the top policymaking forum. It was only after widespread criticism that he yielded the position to the finance minister. Likewise, the latter’s role in the privatisation process was also diminished when Mr Dar was appointed head of the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation.

In the CCI’s case, what exactly is the foreign minister expected to contribute to the council’s deliberations? On the other hand, the presence of the finance minister in the CCI — the top constitutional forum mandated to discuss and decide on matters and disputes related to the federation and the provinces — is of utmost importance at this moment because the implementation of several IMF programme goals and policy reforms hinge on the active involvement of the federating units.

There is no better forum than the CCI to enlist the buy-in of the provinces on the IMF programme and reforms. It can only be hoped that sense will prevail and the prime minister will replace Mr Dar with his finance minister in the CCI in the larger interest of the country.

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Expanding the net

ITH the budget looming, the new government has reached a fork in the road. One choice is massive restructuring and reformation of the economy — a multi-year project that will require endless hard work. The fruits of the effort may be enjoyed only by future governments. However, the political costs will be immediate and immense, which the ruling parties will bear alone. The other choice — the easy path — will circle back to this same junction in five, 10 or 15 years, but will allow those making decisions today to enjoy the short-term benefits of power. Given what has been sacrificed to install the government in Islamabad, one would assume it has by now chosen the path it needs to take forward. The first test of its resolve begins this week. A drive to get the largely undocumented trade sector registered in the taxation system kicked off on Monday under the Tajir Dost Scheme banner. Armed with incentives and penalties, the FBR is undertaking the campaign to add Rs400-500bn to annual revenues. Although the trader class has long been a solid constituency for the PML-N, it appears that it, too, realises the necessity of expanding the tax base. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Sunday has blamed tax evasion by “big fish” as the reason the country was near bankruptcy. The minister specifically pointed to “retailers and wholesalers” as he criticised them for their reluctance to fulfil their tax duties.

Though the finance ministry has so far not spoken publicly on the registration drive, the government seems keen to widen the tax net. From traders to professionals to larger industries, the government looks like it is finally going after undertaxed segments. However, because these efforts seem to be borne more out of compulsion — to win the IMF’s favour — than a desire to make the taxation system more equitable, doubts linger regarding how far the government actually wants to go. With fuel, electricity, and gas prices continuously rising, the salaried class is already under immense stress. It cannot be further burdened.

Therefore, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif would be well-advised to keep his tax net expansion drive on track. During his last tenure, one finance minister's efforts to start course correction were hijacked and derailed by another, who had strange ideas on economic management. Mr Sharif should ensure that this does not recur.

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Letter inquiry

THERE has been a twist in the tale. After the Supreme Court last week deferred to the federal cabinet, asking it to deal with a disturbing letter six Islamabad High Court justices had addressed to the chief justice, observers had worried that a government-sponsored inquiry into intelligence operatives' alleged interference in judicial affairs would prove to be a non-starter.

Even as voices from within the legal community were still criticising the Supreme Court for neglecting its responsibility and ceding full control over the inquiry to the government, a respected former judge, retired chief justice Tassaduq Hussain Jillani, was duly appointed to head the inquiry commission tasked with looking into the judges' letter.

By Monday, however — following an open statement from more than 300 lawyers, amidst whispers that the six IHC justices may be considering directly petitioning the Supreme Court, and a polite 'no, thank you' from Mr Jillani — the scheme seemed to have fallen apart.

Accepting demands that the letter be taken up by the Supreme Court under its jurisdiction defined in Article 184(3), Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa announced on Monday that his court had taken suo motu notice of the matter. A seven-member bench will take the case up for hearing tomorrow. Although some concerns regarding the size and composition of the bench have been raised by certain quarters, the development is a breakthrough for the legal community and is being seen as a positive step.

It is hoped that the court will now arrange for the proceedings to be broadcast live, as in past important cases. The issues raised by the six justices of the

Islamabad High Court have caused quite a sensation, and it would, therefore, be in the public interest if they are also addressed transparently.

The legal community deserves much credit for refusing to accept a compromise in the form of an inquiry commission and pushing for the letter to be taken up by the Supreme Court.

Mr Jillani's well-reasoned refusal to sit in inquiry over six serving justices also deserves commendation. The former chief justice of Pakistan, while thanking the government for its consideration, courteously pointed out that since the letter had been addressed to the Supreme Judicial Council and its chairman, it would be improper of him to interfere in an institutional matter. He also objected to the inquiry's terms of reference, as set by the government, noting that they did not seem relevant to the issue raised in the judges' letter, namely, a consultation on what judges must do when they are placed under duress.

In doing so, Mr Jillani greatly strengthened the argument that others had been making: the judiciary must address this issue internally. One now hopes it will do so enthusiastically.

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Lesser half

IN a nation where women form nearly half the population, they are conspicuously absent from positions of judicial authority. Recent data from the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan highlights that out of the 126 judges in the upper tier of the judiciary, only seven are women. It is particularly alarming that out of the 12 Supreme Court judges, only two are women, highlighting a significant gender disparity at the highest level of the judiciary. This underrepresentation extends to the district judiciary, where women make up only 19pc of the total judicial officers. The journey to gender parity in the judiciary has been fraught with obstacles. It took 70 years for Pakistan to witness its first female high court chief justice, a milestone that casts a spotlight on the systemic barriers faced by women in ascending to leadership positions. The case of justice Fakhar-un-Nissa Khokar is a reminder of this reality; despite her seniority, she was never elevated to become chief justice of the Lahore High Court.

The absence of women in the judiciary perpetuates a skewed perspective within the halls of justice. Women bring unique insights to the bench, essential for addressing gender-specific issues and ensuring a more equitable dispensation of justice. Their presence is not only a matter of representation; it is a prerequisite for fostering a judiciary that reflects the values of fairness and equality. Addressing this disparity requires concerted efforts from all quarters. Reforms in the appointment process are essential to ensure that deserving female candidates are not overlooked, while proactive measures to support women in the legal profession are crucial for nurturing talented female jurists. Most importantly, the path to gender equality demands proactive engagement from women themselves, so that they can assert their rights and claim positions of influence on their own terms. It is time to pave the way for a judiciary that truly represents the aspirations of all Pakistanis.

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Dangerous escalation

MONDAY'S attack by Israel on Iran's consulate in Damascus marks a dangerous escalation in an already volatile region. It is also the continuation of a belligerent posture by an aggressor unbound by the principles of proportionality or respect for sovereign entities. Less than a week ago, Israel carried out air strikes in Syria's Aleppo, killing more than 40 people. It has routinely launched attacks against its neighbours in search of what it says are existential enemies. Using the momentum from its Gaza invasion and the support it has received from Western countries, despite its shocking excesses in the devastated Strip, it is now rapidly wading into a wider conflagration. The Damascus attack, which killed at least seven individuals, including two Iranian top commanders, has sparked vows of retaliation from Tehran. The destruction of a diplomatic facility — a move that flagrantly violates international conventions — underscores a troubling readiness to lay waste to any entity Israel deems an obstacle. The latest act of aggression is part of a broader pattern of military engagements, particularly evident in the protracted siege of Gaza over the past six months, where almost 33,000 people have been butchered, and where famine-like conditions prevail.

The global reaction to the strike has been a mix of condemnation and calls for restraint. While Syria and Iran's allies have vocally decried the strike, the international community is in a diplomatic bind. As it urges de-escalation, it is faced with the reality of a complex, multifaceted conflict that defies easy resolution. The US, though distancing itself from the attack, saying it had "no involvement" and "did not know about it ahead of time", did express concern over any action that could escalate the conflict. Meanwhile, an emergency meeting of the Security Council has been convened at the request of Russia, a close Iranian ally. Israel, emboldened by unconditional US support, disregards the collateral impact on diplomatic norms, regional stability, and human life. The urgent need for Tel Aviv to reassess its approach and rein in its bloodlust cannot be overstated. Washington and its allies must acknowledge that they have already lost their moral authority and need to do more than issuing hollow platitudes. The international community, particularly the UN, must take a more assertive stance in holding Israel accountable for adventurism that threatens to ignite a wider conflict.

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Senate elections

THE Senate returned to almost its full strength yesterday after an unusually sedate election. Unfortunately, polling for KP's seats could not be held due to an ongoing stand-off between the provincial government and the ECP over reserved seats.

Meanwhile, there were few reports of the feverish wheeling-dealing and horse-trading that have, in the past, marred the conduct of Senate polls, which are held every three years to elect half of the total strength of the Upper House.

All of the candidates for Balochistan's seats were declared winners unopposed, while in Punjab, the PTI, PML-N, and PPP reportedly reached an understanding that allowed its seven general seats to be filled without contest. Punjab's five remaining seats — two for women, two for technocrats, and one for minorities — were all grabbed by the PML-N, thanks to its majority in the provincial assembly. In Sindh, the PPP secured all seats but two, which went to the MQM-P and Faisal Vawda, respectively.

Considering the drama surrounding the general election that took place just about two months earlier, the Senate election, at least on the face of it, managed to steer clear of any serious controversies. However, one need only look at the list of returned candidates to begin wondering whether the same forces and considerations prevailed.

For example, both the caretaker prime minister and chief minister of Punjab, who supposedly do not have any party affiliation, managed to secure a seat each, unopposed. The speculation was that they were rewarded for the 'services' they had rendered. The PML-N sacrificed a loyalist's seat for former bureaucrat Ahad Cheema, while 'independent' candidate Faisal Vawda magically won the PPP's support for his candidature at the last minute, despite having nothing obvious to offer in return. Observers naturally connected his good fortune to friends in high places.

These elections also seemed like the end of an era in some respects. The PPP sidelined long-time loyalists and seasoned politicians like Raza Rabbani and Waqar Mehdi when handing out tickets, while the PML-N was forced to ignore stalwarts like Khawaja Saad Rafique, Rana Sanaullah, Khurram Dastgir and Javed Latif while handing its seats over to outsiders.

Finally, a comment on these Senate elections would not be complete without a word on how far-reaching the consequences of interfering in general elections can be. For example, the quarrel over public representation triggered by the ECP's 'bat verdict' still rages and resulted in elections for KP's seats being delayed yesterday.

And, because Senate seats are generally apportioned based on each party's strength in their respective assemblies, one could not help but be reminded of the controversies that still surround how these assemblies were formed. One can only hope that all this legislative power, now secured, will not be abused.

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Pessimistic view

UNSURPRISINGLY, the World Bank has given a pessimistic prognosis of Pakistan's moribund economy. On Tuesday, it said the country's economic growth is expected to pick up — slightly — from the current fiscal year (after contracting 0.2pc last year) but would remain below 3pc for the next two years as “policy constraints to sustainable economic growth remain unaddressed”. Unless a major structural reform programme is durably implemented, growth will remain muted amid continued low investment, persistent external imbalances, distortionary fiscal policies, and a large state presence in the economy, the bank warned in the biannual Pakistan Development Update.

Even the latest growth estimates for Pakistan hinge on “continuous fiscal consolidation and a new bailout programme from the IMF”. Neither the prognosis nor the warning is new. The lender had explicitly stated a few months back that debt-ridden Pakistan's current economic model was not working since it had fallen behind its peers, with progress in poverty reduction now starting to reverse, and the benefits of growth being accrued to a narrow elite.

Pakistan's options are few at this point: it can either head towards the abyss or get its act together to dodge economic devastation. Najy Benhassine, World Bank country director for Pakistan, is hopeful that the nation's ongoing macroeconomic crisis could be the “Pakistan moment”, provided the authorities undertake bold structural reforms to put the faltering economy on the correct track like so many other countries have done on finding themselves on the brink of an economic disaster.

Nonetheless, his message is clear: the only way forward for Pakistan is to implement broad-based reforms on a sustainable basis. “The structural reforms needed to durably improve the economic outlook are known,” he said. Will policymakers heed the advice?

Over the last several months, global lenders, IFIs and credit rating agencies have been forthcoming in their views on the existential threat facing Pakistan's economy as its external and fiscal imbalances continue to constrain its ability to import essential goods and make foreign debt payments. Their message of urgent reforms is often punctuated with their worry over the ruling and business

elites' proclivity to digress from the path and return to their profligate policies as soon as international reserves improve and the external sector stabilises.

Although the current government has repeatedly pledged to implement reforms for sustainable economic revival, a definitive policy direction is missing. Some progress has been made to privatise loss-making PIA, for instance, but the government is yet to spell out a holistic policy for scores of other SOEs.

Economic policy confusion is a major concern for creditors and investors. The prime minister must understand that his plans to boost productivity and exports will not work without the articulation of an unambiguous policy direction for the economy and deep structural reforms.

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Violating lives

FROM ordering live burnings and forced marriages to rape, jirgas persist as a parallel justice system that violates human rights. The influential in rural settings opt for tribal institutions over courts of law to coerce the weak into either settling for compensation or issue rulings that favour the oppressors. Therefore, what happened in Tandlianwala, Faisalabad, is unsurprising. A police inquiry into an 'attempted' rape case of a 12-year-old boy declared that the suspect mentioned in the FIR was acquitted "on the mediation of a jirga/ panchayat, a blatant violation of the Supreme Court judgement". The accused cleric, Abubakar Muavia, was cleared on March 30, when the police presented him in court to seek an extension of his physical remand. The apex court's landmark judgement in 2019 had said that jirgas and panchayats were unconstitutional and did not fall under any other law to the extent that they arbitrate on civil and criminal issues. While this case will now be reinvestigated, the fact is that as long as 'councils of elders' exist as fora for mediation and negotiation in the four provinces, the law will continue to be flouted to preserve social hierarchies.

What this society cannot afford is to see abuse in seminaries as isolated instances. Children routinely endure cruelty, exploitation, rape and sexual abuse at the hands of clerics. News about students being pushed from madressah rooftops, battered with sticks and subjected to extreme violence that makes their

eyes bleed appears with shameful regularity. They are windows into the darkness of spaces where predators intimidate to foster an environment of impunity. Besides, scores of unregistered seminaries are difficult to monitor. These crimes cannot stop unless the state makes registration and stringent regulation mandatory. An international study conducted a couple of years ago shows a favourable shift: 80pc of the population in the tribal areas of former Fata was against jirgas. Delayed judgements and pending cases, a hostile environment for the marginalised in police stations, particularly women, minorities and the poor, and illiteracy are factors that create a lack of trust in the judicial system and prevent people from challenging the social and legal implications of jirgas. Hence, as the Asian Human Rights Commission observed in 2016, the “jirga’s antidote is a fair and functional justice system” to save future generations from abuse.

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On the right track

AT last, amid murmurs of dissent over new rules and allegations of manoeuvring, the Pakistan Football Federation Normalisation Committee has taken a significant stride towards completing the task it was assigned to do nearly four and half years ago. The composition of the FIFA-appointed PFF NC has been changed and Pakistan was banned during that time but in announcing the results of elections in 75 districts, it has shown much-needed signs of progress. The Haroon Malik-led NC was under fire for the delay in holding fresh elections at the crisis-stricken PFF. Last month, it was given another extension by the global football body FIFA until December 2024 to complete its mandate. The first step towards holding elections — club registration and scrutiny — took a long time and then the NC drew the ire of Pakistan’s football fraternity by giving newly registered clubs the right to vote, when the PFF constitution allows this right two years after initial registration. Stakeholders claimed the move was aimed at impacting the vote bank. There were also issues with the voting process being carried out on WhatsApp. Fortunately, the initial results of the first 75 districts were not met with much resentment. The committee must now hold elections in the rest of the districts across the country; it says the process will resume after Eid.

There is hope that matters are on track and that eventually an elected PFF will emerge. The status will allow the PFF to access a greater tranche of funding through FIFA's Forward Programme to develop the game in the country. The response of fans during Pakistan's recent 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers showed the national appetite for the sport. An elected set-up can build on that. But for now, the reins are in the NC's hands. District-level elections will be followed by provincial-level elections. Then elections for PFF president will be held. It is a long road but at least the journey has begun.

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Cheating epidemic

IN recent years, Pakistan's education landscape has been marred by a spate of cheating scandals, casting a pall over the integrity of our exam system. Instances such as a certain invigilator letting students peek into another's copy or into cheat-sheets smuggled into the exam hall were not unheard of. But now, every few days, one hears of cheating occurring in some exam or the other, from the MDCAT last year to more recent reports arising out of Punjab of cheating in Class-IX exams. It is a lucrative racket with money in the tens of thousands reportedly changing hands. At the heart of the problem lies systemic pressure to succeed at any cost. The high stakes associated with exams, coupled with inadequate schooling and a lack of both preparation and confidence in the fairness of the system, push students towards dishonest means. Moreover, the complicity of examination staff facilitates this breach of integrity.

The government's response must be swift. Firstly, there is an urgent need to overhaul the examination system to make it more secure and transparent. The introduction of technological solutions, such as computer-based testing and surveillance cameras in examination centres, could serve as deterrents. Moreover, the curriculum must be revisited to ensure it encourages concepts over rote learning, reducing the desperation that leads to cheating. Secondly, a concerted effort is needed to foster an ethical academic culture that values integrity and hard work over mere outcomes. Lastly, the regulatory framework requires strengthening, with clear penalties for facilitators of cheating. The government's decisive action in Punjab, including the sacking of officials and invigilators and the formation of a cabinet committee to investigate, is a step in

the right direction but should be part of a larger, sustained effort. Putting an end to the cheating epidemic requires more than just administrative measures; it necessitates a cultural shift that repositions education as a journey of intellectual and moral development.

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Mail-in ‘terrorism’

It is deeply alarming how easily threatening letters containing unidentified substances seem to have reached the offices of various justices of the Islamabad and Lahore High Courts, as well as the Supreme Court of Pakistan. They represent an outrageous attempt at terrorising the judiciary through a medium that Pakistan’s counterterrorism authorities have clearly not been monitoring well enough. At least 17 such letters have been received so far; four by the offices of Supreme Court justices, five by LHC justices’ staff, and eight by the staff of IHC justices. More may be on the way. It is as yet not known what the white powder in the envelopes addressed to the judges actually is, but investigators have expressed suspicions it could be a toxic substance meant to poison whoever opened the letters. Specifically, they are investigating whether it could be anthrax, a biological agent that is easily found in nature or can be produced in a lab, and which has earlier been used as a weapon, most prominently in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the US, when it was used to terrorise the American public in a very similar manner.

Details surrounding these incidents have been scarce, and it is not clear whether any of the people who came in contact with these letters have experienced any serious illness. However, some of the policemen who came in contact with the letters reported experiencing minor symptoms, including irritation. It is hoped, however, that there is no cause for major alarm. The letters may simply be an elaborate hoax designed to create an environment of fear or ‘send a message’, but, given how close they came to their intended recipients, they represent a major failure on the part of those tasked with keeping the country and its people safe. While the Counter-Terrorism Department investigates the matter and works on apprehending the perpetrators before they cause further harm, a detailed advisory should be issued to anyone who could be at risk to help them exercise enhanced precaution. Counter-terrorism authorities must, meanwhile, improve

their monitoring of the entire spectrum of possible threats, including chemical and biological terrorism. The country's postal system right now appears vulnerable to exploitation, and measures to secure it need to be taken immediately. This incident should not be taken lightly.

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Failed experiment

AS Pakistan calibrates its response to the ongoing wave of terrorism, a strange but familiar suggestion has come from across the western border. Speaking recently at an iftar in Khost, Mohammad Nabi Omari, Afghanistan's deputy interior minister, called for talks between the banned TTP and the government of Pakistan.

While the regime in Kabul is long believed to have favoured this option, few top Afghan Taliban leaders have said so publicly. While advising both Islamabad and the 'brothers' in the TTP, Mr Omari observed that Al Qaeda was not active in his country. He also felt that the war between the TTP and Pakistan was unwinnable, and that the 'brothers' could continue their campaign for "100 years" and not see any results. The Foreign Office, meanwhile, has rejected the prospect of negotiations with the TTP.

Perhaps the Afghan minister's suggestion is the result of the Taliban's frustration with the TTP. "We have nothing to do with it," he observed, ostensibly referring to TTP terrorism, "but we are getting the heat for it".

From Pakistan's perspective, talks with the TTP have already been tried; the 'ceasefire' collapsed in November 2022, and thereafter the terrorist outfit unleashed a wave of deadly violence against this country that continues. In fact, many observers have said that the TTP used the previous cessation of hostilities to regroup, and the PTI-led government at the time has been chided for letting militants return to their former stomping grounds in KP.

Indeed, Pakistan cannot afford a 'forever' war with the TTP or any other terrorist group. But negotiations must take place from a position of strength, and no compromises can be made on fundamentals such as supremacy of the

Constitution. There is little to suggest that the TTP is willing to abide within this framework. Their earlier demands included amnesty for those accused of heinous terrorist violence, and reversal of Fata's merger with KP.

Meeting both these demands would be akin to a surrender by the state, as they would involve forgiving the killers of thousands of Pakistanis, and reversing a constitutional amendment on the demand of those who have no respect for the Constitution.

If lower-ranking cadres of the TTP, who have committed no crimes, wish to surrender, the option could be considered, and these elements would have to be de-radicalised. But unconditionally embracing the TTP's leadership would be a huge mistake. Instead of promoting talks with the TTP, the Afghan Taliban should ensure that their 'brothers' do not attack Pakistan.

For the government, the only acceptable option would be for the TTP to lay down their arms, and for those involved in acts of terrorism to face the law. The failed experiment of negotiations on the TTP's terms should not be repeated.

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GE outbreak

THE denizens of Pakistan's most populous city seem to be on their own: a new misery awaits them at every turn. These days, apart from the surging crime rate, Karachiites must also worry about an outbreak of a waterborne disease, which has been surging through communities and wreaking havoc on the city's already stretched health facilities. The city's Ruth Pfau Civil Hospital recently reported that it is receiving 1,500 new cases of gastroenteritis at its emergency department every single day, which account for 70pc to 80pc of all medical emergencies received by the facility. The daily numbers of GE patients have remained persistently high, and health officers believe consumption of contaminated water is behind the outbreak. They are worried that people are either not getting sufficient gas supplied to their homes, with which they may boil drinking water, or are avoiding using it for that purpose owing to the hefty increase in the gas tariff.

The water supplied to Karachi's homes is generally contaminated, health experts believe, and boiling tap water is a must if it is to be used for human consumption. Most of the city's population generally rely on this method or domestic filtration solutions to clean the water they use, while the more fortunate may subscribe to bottled water supply services for their drinking needs. However, disease, as Covid-19 taught humanity, does not discriminate between the well-to-do and those not so well-off. A GE outbreak in disadvantaged communities can easily spread to those who can afford the privilege of clean water because of the myriad ways it can pass from person to person. There is a need, therefore, for the city's residents and representatives to collectively demand safer water and better purification facilities from the Karachi Water and Sewerage Corporation. Apart from that, public and private health officials should also engage with their communities to share preventive tips and encourage better hygiene practices.

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Second phase

AKISTAN has long been a sanctuary for Afghans, hosting nearly 4m refugees for over 40 years. The figures, while highlighting the country's generosity, also underscore the significant challenges it faces regarding resource constraints, and, more importantly, security. These concerns are all legitimate, and so Islamabad's desire to see undocumented Afghan citizens repatriated is not without merit. There have been reports, however, of a second phase of the repatriation drive to start this summer, this time aimed at documented refugees (Afghan Citizen Card holders). The Foreign Office has refrained from providing a concrete response, saying "several measures are under consideration and debate". Meanwhile, in the backdrop of such reports, the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan have urged Pakistan to avoid unilateral decisions on the matter. Their request, too, is not without merit. Such a process would have to be managed properly, through dialogue, and with adherence to international norms.

While the Taliban's call for the respectful treatment of its citizens is justified, it is essential for them to acknowledge that these refugees are, fundamentally, their own citizens. Although many refugees have known only Pakistan as their home, Afghanistan is their country of origin, and they should be welcomed back appropriately. It is vital for the Taliban to remember their responsibility towards

them. Kabul should ensure the rights of returning citizens and adopt a governance style that does not repeat past mistakes which led to mass displacement. Welcoming returnees in a manner that respects their rights is paramount for their successful reintegration into Afghan society. Moreover, there is a need to remind the international community of its commitments to the refugees. Many Western countries had pledged to accept Afghans who served them during the US 'war on terror'. Fulfilling these promises is crucial. Many saw Pakistan as a pit stop after the Taliban rode back into Kabul, but even after more than two years, they are stuck in limbo. For Pakistan, addressing its valid concerns through a repatriation process that is voluntary, orderly, and humane is essential. The country's decades-long generosity towards refugees is commendable, yet the road ahead demands careful planning, international cooperation, and a coordinated effort with the Afghan government. The role of organisations like the UNHCR in facilitating the process cannot be overstated. The objective should be a peaceful and stable future for all involved.

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Deadly campaign

A STRING of mysterious killings in Pakistan over the past few years was widely believed to be the handiwork of Indian intelligence. This assumption was strengthened by the fact that most victims were linked to Kashmir-centric armed groups, while in at least two cases the assassinations were publicly linked to India by the foreign secretary.

Now, an investigative report in The Guardian lends further credence to the belief that New Delhi has been organising hits on Pakistani soil. According to the British paper, at least 20 individuals have been murdered since 2020 in this country at the behest of Indian intelligence operatives. The outlet says it has seen evidence provided by Pakistani security agencies, while the report notes that Indian officers have also confirmed the new policy of assassinating enemies and dissidents on foreign soil.

Pakistan is not the only country where those in New Delhi's bad books have paid with their lives. Canada confronted India quite sternly when Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Khalistani activist and Canadian national, was murdered outside a gurdwara in

British Columbia last year. Indian spooks had also reportedly tried to kill a Sikh activist in the US. While India has denied involvement in all these cases, including murders in Pakistan, these denials lack credibility.

Pakistan must confront these considerable threats to its security and sovereignty both internally and on the external front. The Foreign Office has said those responsible for the murders need to be brought to justice, while also emphasising the need for a coordinated international response to India's brazenness. If India has evidence against individuals, it must use diplomatic channels to communicate the information to Islamabad. By no means can India or any other hostile foreign actor act unilaterally within Pakistan's frontiers, and arbitrarily take out individuals.

Our own internal lapses also need to be investigated, as the fact that 20 people were neutralised by foreign operatives on Pakistani soil should send alarm bells ringing within the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies. There are also reports, as mentioned by The Guardian and cited elsewhere earlier, that many of the operations in Pakistan were planned and orchestrated in a friendly Gulf country.

Islamabad must coordinate with the security agencies of our foreign friends to ensure that their soil is not being used for anti-Pakistan activities. The evidence collected in these cases must be shared with foreign governments. Moreover, the reports of Indian involvement in assassination campaigns strengthens Pakistan's case where New Delhi's reported destabilising activities in Balochistan are concerned.

The message, through diplomatic channels, to India must be clear: this campaign of subterfuge must stop, and Pakistan's sovereignty be respected. If India refuses to stop these subversive activities, then Pakistan reserves the right to take up the issue at the highest international forums.

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New Jamaat chief

HAFIZ Naeemur Rehman's election as the new emir of Jamaat-i-Islami signals a generational shift in the religious party's leadership, as the Karachi-based leader defeated veterans, including outgoing JI chief Sirajul Haq, and Liaquat Baloch for the top slot. Hafiz Naeem, a seasoned campaigner who was active in Jamiat, the JI's student wing, as well as at the local government level, has been vocal about Karachi's civic issues and courted younger voters, in contrast with the often dour, traditionalist rhetoric of the Jamaat old guard. Some observers feel JI could have led the Karachi local government, with Hafiz Naeem as the megacity's mayor, had invisible hands not 'guided' the results of last year's LG elections. But that chapter is now closed, and it remains to be seen how the new Jamaat chief will address national issues.

While many may disagree with the JI's right-wing ideology, there are lessons mainstream parties can learn from the Jamaat's smooth leadership transitions over the last eight decades. Firstly, there appears to be a sufficient amount of internal democracy within the religious party. Though the JI's electoral college is limited to a small number of members and not all supporters, internal elections are regular and largely non-controversial. As opposed to this, most mainstream, religious and even nationalist parties in Pakistan are run like personal fiefdoms, with only a fig leaf of internal democracy. In Pakistan's political parties, one's last name, or closeness to the party's ruling family, guarantees success, over merit or competence. Furthermore, during his more than a decade-long stint as JI's Karachi head, Hafiz Naeem raised civic issues, such as water and power woes, rampant crime, etc. Sadly, most parties are out of touch with the problems of the average Pakistani, and offer only sops to the voter. More internal democracy, less family-based appointments, and a commitment to solving the people's problems are required within parties for the health of Pakistani democracy.

Published in Dawn, April 7th, 2024

Inclusive politics

PUNJAB Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz is being criticised on social media for taking what has been seen as a rather divisive position on interprovincial relations. In televised remarks made during the first meeting of the apex

committee of the Punjab government, Ms Nawaz, while speaking about terrorism and the challenges being faced by her government, at one point regretted that “the roads are open ... anyone can come [to Punjab] via the motorway”, before singling out KP for being the source of deadly kite string that took a young man’s life in Faisalabad, and then continuing that “it cannot be that we have security check-posts on our borders, but the rest of our roads are open, and there is an open corridor for anyone, including terrorists and smugglers, to come and go”. The remarks have upset many, who perceive them as a sign of prejudice against the people of KP. Their anger is understandable. While the Punjab CM cannot be faulted for showing concern about the well-being of the people of her province, she should perhaps have considered being a little more circumspect about dragging another province into the matter.

Ms Nawaz would have been better served had she taken her concerns regarding terrorism, smuggling and kite string to the federal government and, directly, to the government of KP and pushed for solutions at the right forums. Suggesting, instead, that the Punjab government ought to regulate who can move in and out of the province is deeply troublesome — she should remember that all Pakistanis have as much of a right to the province as those domiciled in it. She may not have meant to make a statement regarding any particular ethnicity, but as a major political leader, her words could be seen as encouragement for those who actually hold ethnic prejudices. Unfortunately, many of our national leaders routinely forget that all Pakistanis, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion, are entitled to equal respect and consideration. There are examples aplenty of major leaders making statements, either in jest or general ignorance, that reduce entire social groups to an offensive trope. At least those politicians who hope, one day, to lead the country should realise that they must first strive to be inclusive before they can expect to find broad acceptance in Pakistan’s extremely diverse social milieu.

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Beyond rhetoric

THE deadly terrorist attack targeting Chinese workers in Bisham last month has clearly caused a stir within the civilian and military leadership.

Yet while the incident captured global attention as foreigners were targeted, the fact is that hundreds of Pakistanis have been losing their lives to militant violence, particularly in KP and Balochistan, in the ongoing wave of terrorism. In view of this grim reality, the prime minister on Friday decided to take the bull by the horns and himself oversee the national counterterrorism effort.

Shehbaz Sharif called for regular audits of security SOPs, while reiterating the state's resolve to provide adequate protection to Chinese workers involved in various projects in the country. He also highlighted the need to improve the performance of provincial CT departments.

It is welcome that the prime minister has realised the gravity of the situation, and himself decided to address the threat of terrorism. But Pakistan at this juncture requires more than rhetoric and noble intentions to defeat the ogre of terrorism.

The complexity of the terrorist threat in the country requires a well-oiled counterterrorism machinery with sufficient autonomy to neutralise malign actors before they carry out their deadly plans. As mentioned, militants have kept up their campaign of terror with steady momentum, particularly targeting law enforcers and security personnel.

Just on Friday, a police officer providing security cover to a polio team was martyred in South Waziristan, while in Lakki Marwat, three policemen lost their lives in separate attacks. As per figures published in the media, there were nearly 100 militant attacks in February, and 93 in January, resulting in at least 177 fatalities in the first two months of the year. The state can ill afford to ignore these dire numbers.

With regard to the prime minister's renewed resolve to fight terror, it should be stated that both the ideological basis — in the form of the revised National Action Plan — as well as the operational framework — in the form of Nacta — already exist to achieve this aim.

What is needed is the total commitment of the state to get the job done. This would require both the centre and the provinces, as well as the civilian and military arms of the state, to work in tandem in the fight against terrorism. As this paper has argued before, Nacta is the best forum for a coordinated response.

The interior minister recently spoke of breathing new life into the agency; time is of the essence, and the sooner this is done, the better.

Moreover, along with kinetic measures, which are essential, the long-term solutions, as envisaged in NAP, to counter extremism and terrorism lie in deradicalisation and addressing the root causes — primarily injustice, poverty and deprivation — that compel ordinary people to join militant outfits.

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Merchants of death

IN an increasingly rights conscious world professing allegiance to humanity, the situation in Gaza stands as perhaps the worst contradiction, fuelled by Israel's relentless military invasion. The recent call by the UN Human Rights Council to halt arms sales to Israel — although a procedural admonition for some critics — is a desperate cry for sanity in a conflict that has spiralled into what can only be called an extermination campaign.

The facts are undeniable: over 33,000 lives snuffed out, tens of thousands more maimed, and those who are left are on the brink of famine, living off fewer than 245 calories a day. The Netanyahu government's actions highlight a flagrant disregard for international law and the principles of human decency. The employment of starvation as a method of warfare, the use of AI to target densely populated areas, and the denial of essential humanitarian aid to 2.4m Palestinians have effectively rewritten the rules of warfare.

The tragic incident involving the World Central Kitchen, where a targeted strike killed seven aid workers, six of whom were foreigners, encapsulates the impunity of Israel's military operations. The event prompted a rare rebuke from US President Joe Biden, who has now hinted at a potential shift in US policy.

However, this should not have been the threshold for international outrage. The fact that it took the deaths of these particular individuals to move Washington is a damning indictment of selective empathy and the disproportionate weight of Western blood over that of the Palestinian people. The US, by continuing arms

sales to Israel — it reportedly approved bombs the very day the strike occurred — is complicit in the bloodshed.

A continuation of this death-dealing would further sink the country's stated commitment to justice and human rights on the global stage. Meanwhile, Israel's temporary permission for aid delivery into Gaza, following intense US pressure, is a minuscule gesture in the face of the broader atrocities committed. Such measures are akin to placing a band-aid on a haemorrhage; they fail to address the root cause of the conflict or the systemic violence perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinians.

The need for a paradigm shift in how the international community, particularly the US, approaches the Israel-Palestine conflict is long overdue. It is not enough to condemn actions post-factum or to issue slap-on-the-wrist warnings devoid of substantive action. There must be a concerted effort to halt arms sales to Israel and to hold it accountable for its violations of international law, something it has long become accustomed to.

In the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres “nothing can justify the collective punishment” in Gaza. It has been six long months. The destruction, the bloodlust, the war must end, and they must end now.

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Killing fields

ERHAPS rankled by the daily flood of grisly news — murders, armed robberies, muggings and kidnappings — and panic among the public, the PPP and MQM-P have engaged in a war of words. In another sad instance of political point-scoring taking primacy over a matter as grave as Karachi's crime epidemic, the MQM-P demanded policing powers for the Rangers across Sindh. This was met with a sharp rebuke from the PPP — it accused the MQM-P of undermining the police force due to “vested interests”. Meanwhile, according to police data, there were more than 90,000 street crime incidents in 2023, 7,822 cases in January 2024, 5,876 in February and 2,234 in March. Media reports claim nearly 50 people have been killed in the past three months, with at least 16 lives lost to crime in Ramazan.

Indeed, the resentment against the ruling party's failure to restore peace and safety in Karachi and other parts of Sindh, especially the bandit-infested riverine stretch, is valid. The PPP also has to battle the common perception that it has a stake in Karachi's bedlam and the turmoil in the katcha areas. But the solutions presented are debatable. After all, the Rangers have been in the metropolis since the 1980s. Almost four decades of the force's deployment have not led to a perceptible difference in Karachi's crime score. Therefore, politicians should be mindful of the fact that paramilitary forces provide momentary calm; long-term relief lies in an effective and empowered police. Other than coordination between the police and residents, political commitment to bolstering and incentivising law enforcement can encourage denizens to become witnesses so that fewer cases result in bail for offenders. As the city grapples with this challenge, accountability has to be established for illegal weapons. Any strategy to tackle such a staggering surge in street crimes must include superior preventive steps — streetlights, CCTV monitoring and identifying hotspots for round-the-clock patrolling.

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Middle East heat

A SENSE of foreboding prevails over the Middle East, as regional states in particular, and the international community overall, await Iran's response to Israel's attack on its diplomatic facilities in Damascus last week. Amongst the victims were several members of the Iranian military, including two generals associated with the Sepah-i-Pasdaran, and the strike was seen as a stark provocation by Israel to draw Iran into a direct conflict, also possibly pulling in the US. While there has been plenty of rhetoric from all sides, both Iran and the US have so far managed the crisis carefully, though the danger is far from over. A military aide to the Iranian supreme leader has said that no Israeli diplomatic facilities remain safe anymore, while Israel's defence minister has boasted that his country can "deal with Iran". For Tehran's rulers, the dilemma is considerable. If the Iranians react too strongly, Israel can call its Western allies — primarily the US — for help by playing the victim card and ensuring a regional conflagration. If Iran fails to react, it will be seen as weak domestically, unable to defend its

interests abroad, and Israel will be emboldened. Therefore, the ayatollah and his generals will have to navigate between both of these unappealing options.

The shadow war between Israel and Iran in Syria has been going on for over a decade, dating back to the Syrian civil war. Israel has reportedly carried out hundreds of air strikes in Syria, hitting Iranian and Hezbollah targets, as well as civilian infrastructure. But the strike on the Iranian embassy's consular section may mark a turning point, as the temperature in the region — in the aftermath of the Oct 7 events — has reached boiling point. The key to preventing further escalation in this scenario lies with the West, particularly the US. America must communicate to Israel that further provocations, particularly targeting sovereign states, will be unacceptable. The UN Security Council should send a similar message to Israel and its backers. Observers have been saying since the beginning of the war on Gaza that a regional conflict is very much a possibility. Indeed, such a slow-boil conflict is already underway in the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Gulf. If Israel is allowed to continue its provocative behaviour, then the 'next big one' might be closer than we think.

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World Bank's advice

IN recent years, Pakistan's fiscal situation has deteriorated significantly due to persistently low tax revenue collection and burgeoning public expenditure.

This has led to large budget deficits year after year, while a massive debt has been accumulated in the attempt to plug the gap. The situation has had a spill-over effect on the external sector, as reflected in the recurrence of balance-of-payments crises every few years.

It is in this context that the World Bank, in its new policy note, has reiterated its 'advice' to the government to implement fiscal sector reforms in the next federal and provincial budgets. The objective of the suggested reforms is to cut down the consolidated fiscal deficit by boosting tax revenues, controlling expenditure, and reforming borrowing processes to limit debt accumulation.

Another goal is to enhance the efficiency and productivity of government expenditure. Fiscal sector reforms play a crucial role in increasing national

savings and investment. India understood the import of the fiscal sector for macroeconomic management and started the reforms process after its 1991 economic crisis.

Consequently, it has attracted massive domestic and foreign investment. It has not had to seek another IMF bailout and is now the world's third-largest economy.

However, the latest policy note is different from the earlier ones as it calls for the participation of Pakistan's provinces — as equal stakeholders — in this reform process for stronger inter-government coordination on fiscal issues. Therefore, the bank wants a national fiscal policy that aligns both the federal and provincial tax effort and spending framework in line with the constitutional mandate.

“Implement the new Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Limitation Acts at the federal and provincial levels, including through development and implementation of a national medium-term fiscal framework through the FY25 budget process,” the bank told the government.

The suggested reforms, needed to create room for growth-oriented spending, are expected to be made part of a new and bigger medium-term IMF programme that the finance minister will be discussing with the Fund on the sidelines of the World Bank-IMF meetings in Washington next week.

As the prime minister has warned multiple times of late, the next IMF programme will be far tougher than any other Pakistan has embarked on in the past; it will focus on fiscal and external sector reforms for recovery and growth.

Given the country's extremely vulnerable external position, which has forced the government in the last two years to restrict imports and contract economic growth to avert a sovereign default, the next IMF programme is expected widely to be extremely tough in terms of both the speed of required adjustments and the structural reform goals under it.

These targets will be difficult for the centre to attain without provincial buy-in and ownership of reforms.

Saudi investment

CONSIDERING the decades-old ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it is not surprising that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif chose to visit the kingdom as his first foreign destination since returning to power.

Along with visiting the holy cities for pilgrimage, Mr Sharif met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler, in Makkah on Sunday. A variety of topics were discussed between the two leaders. Perhaps the most important points from the joint readout issued after the meeting were talk of "expediting" Saudi investment in Pakistan, and Riyadh's desire to see "peace and stability" in the subcontinent.

The figure mentioned for Saudi investment, after the meeting, was \$5bn. Earlier the Saudis had pledged to bring \$25bn to Pakistan through the military-backed Special Investment Facilitation Council. It has not been specified where Riyadh will put its money, but it is said the Saudi funds could end up in mining, specifically the Reko Diq project, while the Arab state is also reportedly interested in other sectors. Meanwhile, "the importance of dialogue between Pakistan and India" was stressed during the meeting, indicating a possible Saudi role to facilitate de-escalation of tensions in South Asia.

Various figures for Saudi money have been cited several times, and talk of major investments goes back to the time of the PTI government. But other than bailouts and emergency deposits, little substantial investment has been made. Perhaps with a new government in power, these funds will start to materialise.

But whether it is the Saudis or someone else, if we want foreign countries to invest in Pakistan, three things are essential: political stability, security guarantees, and continuity of economic policies. Unless there is continuity and consonance on all these fronts, few will be willing to put their funds into Pakistani projects.

The potential for investment in several sectors is considerable; the issue is that the state has to address the barriers that stand in the way of attracting foreign investment, and create a pro-business environment, minus the red tape and corruption.

Also, if foreign players invest in Pakistan, they will not be looking to dole out charity. They will come to make money, which is why profit repatriation must be smooth to ensure continued foreign investment. A few billion dollars will hardly turn around our economy.

What is needed is long-term thinking by all stakeholders to help Pakistan break the shackles of dependence, and realise its economic potential. As for Saudi mediation in our dispute with India, this should also be seen in the context of geo-economics.

Riyadh is eyeing a \$100bn investment plan in India, and wants peace in the neighbourhood. It remains to be seen if the allure of Arab money can convince India's leadership to talk peace with Pakistan.

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Charity for change

PAKISTANIS are large-hearted people who empty their pockets at the slightest hint of another's need.

The Stanford Social Innovative Review reported a few years ago that the country contributed over 1pc of its GDP towards philanthropy. A study by the Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy said that approximately \$2bn is donated by Pakistanis per year.

Today, as Pakistanis celebrate Eid, it is apt to recall that the collective culture of compassion is rooted in the tradition of 'giving' in the Muslim faith, and it takes on various forms: zakat — a mandatory duty on a Muslim's assets for other needy Muslims — fitra, qarz-i-hasana, sadqa, infaaq, khairaat, etc.

Moreover, religious tradition also mandates discretion in charity with the intention of protecting the identity and dignity of every beneficiary. While most Muslims are particularly generous during the holy month of Ramazan, the irony of crippling price hikes in the same period — a problem the country has to contend with every year — is not lost on anyone.

The patterns of giving, however, have altered over the years: people now prefer to help individuals, trusted religious charities, medical institutes and schools instead of state-sponsored donation drives due to the absence of government accountability and a resounding trust deficit. When the state is involved, the donors question where the funds are going.

The fusillade of appeals for funds and advertisements fill our screens and newspapers while the cityscape reflects destitution — women, children and the elderly, crowding streets, soup kitchens and shrines. There is then a need to reimagine altruism for sustained social change and justice, particularly in the midst of extreme economic misery. For this, the philanthropic sector ought to find channels to redistribute wealth and provide a strong overarching structure for charity to reach causes such as gender justice, climate refugees, healthcare, education, amenities and housing with the aim of amplified, long-term impact.

In the absence of a trusted state mechanism, charities can collaborate and identify the areas of greatest need. Concrete steps can include the expansion and transparency of income support schemes, job opportunities and financial cover for households and the homeless who are either living a hand-to-mouth existence or have nothing. It is time to donate with justice. The state, meanwhile, can play a role to ensure donations are not ending up in the pockets of extremists.

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Walton land allegations

THE allegations of corruption and violation of rules in the sale of Lahore's Walton airport land by the Civil Aviation Authority to the Punjab Central Business District Development Authority, made by a private aviation industry body, deserve a fair probe.

In its letter to the aviation authorities, the Aircraft Owners & Operators Association of Pakistan has pointed out that the airport land had been sold by the CAA to the provincial real estate developer at less than 15pc of its market value of Rs350bn, and that several rules and regulations were flouted while closing the deal.

The CAA has dismissed the accusations as baseless and fake. The provincial real estate development agency has also refuted the AOOAP claims, saying it was an attempt to bring the project into disrepute.

An eventful season

Their response has, however, raised questions. Even though the deal involves two government agencies, there is no denying the fact that a powerful real estate business lobby, which stands to benefit from the scheme, had provided the impetus for this multibillion-rupee commercial project. In addition, it is an open secret that no development project, least of all one involving real estate, implemented in this country is above board.

The way the Punjab government rushed the controversial Ravi Urban Development project in total disregard of the livelihoods of those whose land it was forcibly trying to acquire, while also flouting court orders, is just another example. It is, therefore, advisable that an independent probe be carried out into the AOOAP's allegations — for the sake of transparency, if nothing else.

This is important to remove public doubts over the transaction as well as the project being undertaken. It is also crucial to dispel the perception that the scheme has been undertaken to benefit some wealthy business groups.

If the controversy persists, it may scare away potential investors and impede the project. No one should fear the inquiry if their hands are clean.

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Living rough

WE either don't see them or don't want to see them — not even when they are actively trying to get our attention. In fact, we have become so desensitised to the phenomenon of children living and working on the streets that they have come to represent 'just another inconvenience' of our daily lives. The International Day for Street Children was observed yesterday, and it is worth taking a moment to come to terms with the dimensions of this obscene crisis. Experts believe that anywhere between 1.5 to 2.5m Pakistani children can be categorised as 'street children' — those who either live on the streets of our cities

or are forced to work on them. Multiple studies have reiterated that low income/poverty is the primary reason why children are pushed to the streets and, disquietingly, it is usually the parents of these children doing the pushing. At the same time, it is also fairly common for 'mentors', to whom children may have been entrusted by their families, to be exploiting them for economic gain.

On the streets, these children face an extremely cruel life. Verbal abuse from the general public is the most common harm they face, and beatings and other forms of physical abuse can be routine. It has been well-documented that street children also suffer sexual abuse at the hands of paedophiles preying on their vulnerability. While many NGOs have been striving to alleviate the plight of street children, broader societal action is also needed. For example, we can demonstrate more compassion and empathy: even small acts of kindness can make a significant difference in these children's lives. As we understand the relevance of the International Day for Street Children, we must pledge to not only acknowledge their existence but also work towards creating a society where no child is condemned to the streets and every child's right to a safe, nurturing environment is upheld.

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An eventful season

THE Senate chairman and deputy chairman were elected unopposed, and 41 new senators were sworn in on Tuesday, bringing to a close the reconfiguration of the Pakistani political order triggered by the dissolution of the PTI government on the same date two years earlier. Syed Yousuf Raza Gillani of the PPP and the PML-N's Syedal Khan Nasir, respectively, 'won' the Senate chairman and deputy chairman seats amidst a boycott by the PTI, which had called for the election to be postponed till seats allocated to KP in the Upper House had been filled. Ignoring the opposition party's plea, government representatives pressed ahead with the 'democratic process' and completed what has been criticised and derided by both political opponents and many observers as a 'silent coup' which began with the wholesale rigging of electoral results following the general elections held on Feb 8. As things stand, the PPP-PML-N combine now controls around two-thirds of both the Upper and Lower Houses of parliament and could, therefore, start affecting changes in the Constitution if it so wishes. However, no

single party enjoys even a simple majority, meaning their strength is only in their unity.

The current state of affairs appears to be precisely what political observers had long predicted: that the general election would give birth to another fractured parliament which would be amenable to being controlled from behind the scenes. Although initial results made it seem that the voters may have briefly upset that plan, the final outcome has been that which many perceive to be 'preordained'. The ECP dutifully kept moving the goalposts, seemingly to ensure that the 'plan' did not go awry. Consider its latest: it postponed Senate elections for the KP Assembly on the grounds that the assembly "wasn't complete", even though it did not seem to matter on Tuesday that the Senate was similarly incomplete before it proceeded to elect a chairman and deputy chairman. Previously, elections for the presidency, prime minister, speaker and deputy speaker of the National Assembly had also been held in 'incomplete' Houses. Still, it will be the ECP's 'original sin' which will be remembered most. In retrospect, the electoral watchdog's decision to deprive the PTI of its electoral symbol was what appeared to ensure that it would be the will of unelected forces, and not the voters', that would ultimately prevail.

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Security lapses

THE attack on Chinese engineers in Bisham recently was a grim reminder of the complexities the state faces in ensuring the safety of foreigners. The probe committee's findings revealed serious lapses in security measures. The bus, far from being bombproof, was not even bulletproof. Such failures demonstrate a systemic disregard for the safety of foreigners working on strategic projects within Pakistan. But why, despite the Chinese coming under attack repeatedly, is this pattern of negligence allowed to persist? There may be no simple answer, but there is also no denying that our security apparatus is plagued with a lack of coordination, accountability, and adherence to established procedures.

There were three attacks inside of a week in March with the aim of undermining Chinese projects in Pakistan. The Chinese have invested billions in projects across the country and Pak-China ties are nearly as old as our nation itself.

Experts point towards religious extremism, perceived threats against traditional values due to development projects under CPEC, non-state actors and separatist saboteurs.

But blaming external elements without introspecting on internal security flaws and lack of effective counterterrorism strategies is counterproductive. Moreover, it will not do to point fingers at the victims and say they are the ones “resentful” of security protocols. One must remember that the state’s history of compromises with militant groups like the TTP has only emboldened those with nefarious intent.

At the same time, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that a sharp rise in terror attacks does coincide with the Taliban takeover in Kabul. While no one came forward for the Bisham attack, separatists were quick to claim those in Balochistan. The security establishment is likely eyeing a foreign hand. But conjecture alone will not rid us of our troubles. The problem still remains, regardless of the source.

A re-evaluation of how security is conceptualised and implemented here is long overdue. Ensuring the safety of foreign citizens is paramount, not just for diplomatic relations but for our economic future. Our friendly ties can only weather so much. How long before the Chinese decide to reconsider their investments here? Their citizens have come under attack too many times since the multibillion-dollar CPEC project was announced in 2015 — one that has been seen as a game changer for infrastructure, transport and electricity.

The state must employ seriousness in tackling this challenge. This includes enhancing intelligence-sharing and CT cooperation, ensuring strict adherence to security SOPs, and fostering a culture of accountability, with shortcomings promptly addressed.

Furthermore, engaging with residents to alleviate concerns regarding development projects, working with them on localised development projects, and tackling the root causes of extremism is essential. Only then can Pakistan hope to safeguard its guests and, by extension, its national interests and international partnerships.

Tragic travels

FOR those embarking on road and boat journeys, the probability of fatal accidents has seen a steady rise. The recent spate of mishaps should serve as reminders of the perils of public transport in the country. Eid revelry took an unfortunate turn in Qasim Jokhio village in Thatta — at least 17 out of 100 pilgrims on their way to the Shah Noorani shrine in Khuzdar died in a road accident that left 50 wounded. Separately, another two were killed in the Lawkhryan area and the Quetta-Karachi National Highway in Khuzdar — all preventable calamities caused by a faulty truck and reckless or rookie drivers. On the other front, boats, too, are proving dangerous: at least eight persons drowned when a boat carrying 15 people capsized in the Indus near Kund Park in Nowshera. In Charsadda, three children drowned in the Swat river and a young boy, caught in steel wires, died in the Ghurzandi dam near Kohat.

Indeed, the list of administrative flaws is endless, and existing regulations — from putting on seatbelts and helmets to travel in safe vehicles — are poorly implemented. The authorities must come down hard on underperforming departments and personnel, and devise a robust safety programme comprising road investment, lighting, speed cameras and inspection of vehicles and licences. Traffic police, essential to safe roads, ought to be made accountable for accidents caused by ramshackle transport and lawbreaking drivers, thereby ensuring an eye on untrained motorists and overcrowded vehicles. Moreover, guidelines for boat and ferry movement and safety, with mandatory life jackets, a limited number of passengers and life guards on river banks and the seafront, is the least administrators can do to keep citizens alive. A gasping economy makes instituting safety valves a challenge. The best solution, however, comprises safe and economical options for low-income groups so that they can survive holiday excursions. Even a single life lost is a tragedy that cannot morph into a statistic.

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Upholding the law

THE recent discord in Bahawalnagar offers a chance to reflect on the sanctity of the law and its enforcement across all ranks of our security apparatus. The episode reflects the importance of following established legal protocols and the

consequences when these are bypassed. The series of events began on April 7 when police reportedly raided a serving army officer's house over allegations his brother was in possession of an unlicensed weapon. Things soon escalated to a confrontation that captured significant attention on social media, with several videos of the alleged incidents going viral. The situation was exacerbated by actions that reportedly deviated from standard operating procedures, including allegations of illegal detention and violent confrontations between both sides. The events highlight gaps in adherence to the law and their grave repercussions. No individual, irrespective of their position or affiliation within the security forces, is above the law. Our legal frameworks are designed to protect the rights of all citizens. Strict adherence to the law must be the guiding principle that dictates all actions of not just our lawmen, but all institutions. In this instance, had the law been meticulously followed from the start, the fallout could have been averted.

It is encouraging to see that both the police and army leadership are committed to holding a transparent investigation into the matter. This willingness to hold accountable those within their respective ranks is a positive step towards reinforcing the rule of law. It is critical that these investigations be conducted impartially and their findings made public. Such transparency will not only serve justice but also restore public trust in these institutions. Moreover, this incident underscores the necessity for unity and cooperation among our security forces. The strength of a nation's security framework lies not just in its individual components but in their ability to operate cohesively. It is essential to prioritise enhanced training in legal protocols and bolster cooperation between agencies. Additionally, establishing clear and consistent channels for communication among the multiple security bodies is vital. Ultimately, this unfortunate episode must reinforce the fact that violence serves no one, least of all the public, whom both parties are sworn to serve. Recognising this fact is vital not only for the integrity of our security forces but also for the preservation of civil liberties in society.

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Noshki killings

THERE have been numerous incidents in Pakistan's history where innocent people have been singled out and murdered on the basis of their ethnic or confessional identity.

The brutal massacre in Noshki, Balochistan, late Friday night is only the latest example of this grim trend. According to reports, armed militants had set up a blockade on the Quetta-Taftan highway, and after stopping a bus, forced nine passengers off the vehicle.

The victims' papers were checked and later, their bodies found under a bridge. All the victims hailed from different towns in Punjab. In a similarly grisly episode last October, six construction workers, also from Punjab, were massacred in Turbat while they were asleep.

Meanwhile, aside from suspected Baloch separatists, sectarian terrorists have used similar methods to hunt down their victims. At least 29 Shia passengers were mowed down by Lashkar-i-Jhangvi terrorists after they were pulled off a bus in Mastung in 2011, while 20 passengers, also Shia, met a similar fate in the massacre on Babusar Top in 2012.

No cause can justify the slaying of innocent people in such a brutal manner. The BLA has claimed responsibility for the Noshki atrocity. Previously, too, Baloch militants have been suspected of carrying out attacks on 'outsiders' — mostly poor workers who have left their homes to provide for their families.

This incident will hardly win sympathy for the separatists' cause, and, will, in fact, lead to revulsion at the brutality involved. Though terrorist acts carried out by militant groups are unacceptable, Balochistan's grievances are genuine.

But the struggle to secure the province's legitimate rights must be peaceful and within the democratic framework. Murdering innocent non-Baloch workers and 'settlers' does a huge disservice to the struggle to secure constitutional rights for all of Balochistan's people.

Looking at the bigger picture, the Noshki killings highlight the varied threat militancy poses to the country's security. While religiously inspired groups are spearheading violent campaigns in KP and the north, Baloch separatists have created a state of insecurity in Balochistan. Left unattended, these separate but equally dangerous militant campaigns pose an immense national security threat.

In Balochistan, the state has failed to control militancy despite maintaining an overwhelming security blanket across the province. It must be asked why Baloch separatists continue to target civilians as well as security men despite such large deployment.

The key to addressing militancy in Balochistan is two-pronged. Short-term measures must focus on neutralising armed actors who threaten the state and its citizens, including snapping any links with foreign backers that may be providing financial and logistical support to separatist outfits.

In the longer term, the poverty and deprivation that blight much of Balochistan must be addressed judiciously to stem the flow of recruits to the separatist cause.

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On the margins

IT appears that we are bent upon taking the majoritarian path. Thus, the promise of respect and equality for the white in the flag is not being kept. Our minorities, at the bottom of the social pecking order, are denied rights, security and equity; their women and girls are targets of the most heinous violations, such as abductions, forcible conversions, forced marriages and rape. UN human rights experts are rightly shocked by the lack of protection for females from the country's religious communities. "Hindu and Christian girls remain particularly vulnerable to religious conversion, abduction, trafficking, child, early and forced marriage, domestic servitude and sexual violence," read a statement, issued in Geneva on Thursday.

While Pakistan's women's movement began in the early 1980s against a military dictator's anti-women and anti-minority edicts, much remains to be done to

improve the circumstances of young girls and women belonging to minority groups to save them from the might of social structures which permit and condone their exploitation. For starters, the authorities should be able to muster enough courage to clamp down on extremist and feudal elements who commit excesses against the minorities. On their part, activists should be at the forefront of a campaign to raise awareness about laws that guarantee personal freedoms and aim to eliminate misogyny; their efforts should ensure that all stand equal before the law. The law enforcers must be compelled to shed patriarchal and insensitive attitudes in order to facilitate victims of unconscionable crimes. Sadly, Pakistan's current trajectory lays bare an uncomfortable truth: a nation that fails to guard human rights and legal liberties, and that alienates segments of its citizenry, will hurtle towards imbalance, strife and poverty. Prosperous societies consolidate security and pluralism by quashing all forms of ideological or social supremacy. It makes sense, then, for political parties to commit to a lot more than merely the electoral catchphrase of 'rule of law'.

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Opposition alliance

AFTER the customary Ramazan interlude, political activity has resumed as usual. A 'grand' opposition alliance has emerged, comprising several political parties that have chosen to stand against the incumbent government on the grounds that the latter 'stole' the Feb 8, 2024, elections through the widespread manipulation of results. Calling itself the TTAP — the Tehreek-i-Tahaffuz-i-Ayeen-i-Pakistan, or 'Movement to protect the Constitution' — this assortment of political parties, comprising the PTI, the BNP-M, PkMAP and the MWM, has vowed to launch "a countrywide movement for the rule of law". The Jamaat-i-Islami will consider joining the alliance after it holds an internal consultation under its new chief, while rumour has it that the disgruntled Maulana Fazlur Rahman may also be invited to join the JUI-F's forces to the cause. If the coalition solidifies, it could put considerable stress on the ruling coalition, which has started seeing some restlessness within its own ranks ever since several 'hand-picked nominees' were given tickets over long-time loyalists for the recent Senate elections. In particular, the JI and JUI-F's ability to mobilise large numbers of workers may give the government cause for alarm.

It appears clear from the name the alliance has given itself what its biggest concern is. With the government coalition handed two-thirds control of both houses of parliament, the opposition is concerned that this legislative power may be abused to alter the makeup of the Constitution — especially in light of past experience when controversial legislation was hastily approved by the then ruling PDM coalition. It is likely that the opposition parties feel they must be in a position to challenge any attempt at legislative overreach by the government and to build up enough public pressure to deter the current set-up from getting too adventurous in law-making. As long as protests stay political and remain within the bounds set by the law, they ought to be welcomed as part of the democratic process. Meanwhile, the government should desist from resorting to any unlawful or extra-legal means to keep the political challenge at bay and also resist the temptation of using the state machinery to keep control over the opposition. The political situation at the moment appears quite delicately balanced; it may tip over due to even the slightest miscalculation. It is imperative, therefore, for this challenge to be dealt with politically.

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Iran's counterstrike

THE Middle East, indeed, the entire international community, was on tenterhooks after Israel struck the consular section of Iran's embassy in Damascus on April 1.

While Tel Aviv has been striking Iranians and their allies in Syria for over a decade, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, this incident was different, and was seen by Tehran as a declaration of war.

It was the first time Israel hit an official Iranian facility, killing several members of the Sepah-i-Pasdaran, including two senior generals. Tehran's response to this provocation was expected, and it came late on Saturday, in another 'first', as the Islamic Republic rained a barrage of drones and missiles directly on Israel.

From here, it is into the unknown: either diplomacy and de-escalation can kick in and bring the region, and the world, back from the brink. Or a catastrophic conflagration can ensue, resulting in more devastation, bloodshed and global economic misery.

Israel's Western friends — particular the US and many European states — have used sanctimonious adjectives to denounce Tehran's 'reckless' counterstrike, and have reiterated their 'ironclad' commitment to Israel's defence.

The rest of the international community, including UN Security Council members China and Russia, have taken a more measured approach, emphasising de-escalation. Pakistan has also highlighted the need to “stabilise the situation and restore peace”. The fact is that Israel, by attacking Iran's diplomatic facilities and violating Syrian airspace, is largely responsible for this dangerous situation. And its recklessness must be reined in.

There was, of course, tremendous domestic pressure on the Iranian government to retaliate, and Tehran appears to have taken the pragmatic route by demonstrating its deterrence capability, while stepping back from all-out war. Iranian officials have said the matter is “concluded”, though top generals say if Israel responds, Iran will again hit back.

This is a very dangerous moment for the international community. Instead of mollycoddling Israel, the Western bloc needs to prevent it from taking more provocative steps. If Tel Aviv does take further military action against Iran, then all bets are off, and a full-scale war could be inevitable. The path towards de-escalation is clear. Israel must immediately end the slaughter in Gaza, which is the key driver of the current confrontation in the Middle East.

Moreover, it must cease its roguish acts of targeting sovereign states including Iran, Lebanon and Syria. If the West keeps talking tough, it will embolden Israel and could drag the US and Europe into a shooting war with Iran and its regional allies.

This is what Benjamin Netanyahu may actually want, to take the world's attention away from the massacre in Gaza, and to fight Iran to the last American. Deft statesmanship is the need of the hour to prevent a devastating showdown.

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Going off track

LIKE many other state-owned enterprises in the country, Pakistan Railways is unable to deliver, while haemorrhaging public funds by the billions. Along with an unenviable safety and performance record, PR's infrastructure is struggling to keep up. As pointed out in a recent report in this paper, the Railways is operating around 100 locomotives that have completed their operational life, with some of these engines dating back five decades. Considering the fragile state of the economy, PR does not have the funds to replace these ageing engines, while it has to incur heavy costs on their maintenance. This also creates safety issues due to the frequent faults the locomotives develop.

The problem of ageing engines is just one part of the PR's long saga of neglect and lack of performance. Ill-maintained tracks and equipment, as well as an inefficient workforce, contribute to the Railways' woes. As a study published by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics put it, the PR's "19th-century infrastructure still grapples with the challenges of the 21st century". Several reform plans have been floated, but as is the norm in Pakistan, these initiatives have been thwarted by official and bureaucratic lethargy, as well as resistance from within the PR's workforce. Privatisation, or at least a public-private partnership, is one option, where passenger and freight services are operated by private parties, while the state maintains and regulates infrastructure. Some private train services have been started, and have maintained a decent standard of service delivery. Also crucial to the Railways' revival is the realisation of the multibillion-dollar ML-1 project under CPEC. This key scheme has also failed to get off the ground, primarily due to funding constraints, though the current administration hopes to seal the deal with China soon. While overhauling PR is a massive undertaking, a safe and efficient rail network is essential for economic growth, with improved performance in both the freight and passenger sectors.

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Caught unawares

PAKISTAN has once again been caught off-guard by the devastating impact of unseasonal and intense rains across its provinces, with dozens of lives lost and considerable infrastructural damage. Such natural anomalies are reflective of

climate change, as rightly pointed out by PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. The damage wrought by the rains, while not the annual monsoons, is symptomatic of preparedness that is perennially lacking. What is required is not just a reactive approach but proactive strategies to mitigate the impact of such disasters.

The government must prioritise the upgrading of infrastructure to withstand extreme weather. This includes reinforcing buildings, securing electrical and gas supply systems against outages, and enhancing the capacity of dams and drainage systems to manage excess water. For regions like Balochistan and KP, where fragile structures are prevalent, introducing and enforcing stringent building codes is crucial.

Furthermore, there is a dire need for flood-risk management plans that are regularly updated and rigorously implemented. These should include community-based early warning systems and evacuation plans that are well understood by the public. The efficacy of these measures depends significantly on awareness campaigns that educate people about what to do during floods and storms. Moreover, environmental degradation exacerbates the impact of heavy rains. We must not only maintain but expand our forest cover and manage watersheds and riverbanks with sustainable practices to reduce the speed and impact of run-off.

These adjustments must be complemented by a broader commitment to addressing climate change. Pakistan must advocate for stronger international cooperation on climate issues, and seek technological and financial support to execute adaptation strategies. Research institutions must be mobilised to study the impacts of climate change specific to Pakistan, and develop solutions that can be implemented at the local level.

All this requires substantial government funding and the integration of climate change into all aspects of public policy planning. Our leadership at all levels needs to be geared towards protecting citizens from the impending and ongoing impacts of climate change. This means a shift from superficial discussions to actionable policies.

Preparing for monsoon seasons or extreme weather events — like the catastrophic floods of 2022 — should not just be about managing the crisis but

preventing the worst of its impacts. The time for mulling is long past. It is now time to act.

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Tough talks

NO matter how painful, a larger, medium-term IMF bailout, with complementary financial support from ‘friendly’ countries, is imperative for Pakistan to address its balance-of-payments troubles.

However, the key to unlocking fresh IMF funds lies in convincing the lender that Pakistan is now ready to undertake real reforms. Seeking a bailout of \$6bn-\$8bn before the current fiscal year ends, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is set to hold discussions with the Fund for new lending on the margins of the IMF and World Bank spring meetings in Washington, as well as muster the support of ‘friendly’ nations for its request.

Negotiations for the new loan will not be easy even though the Fund is, according to the minister, “very receptive” to Pakistan’s request for a new programme. Indeed, it has expressed its willingness to help Islamabad navigate through its crisis ever since Pakistani authorities broached the subject of a follow-up programme with its mission last month during the final review of the just-concluded \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement.

Yet it has made it clear that the new bailout hinges on Pakistan’s readiness to implement tough, unpopular reforms the country had earlier circumvented. More recently, IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said that Pakistan was in discussions with the Fund for a follow-up programme to the previous SBA, but added that “important issues” needed to be solved, including “the tax base, how the richer part of society contributes to the economy, the way public spending is being directed and ... creating ... a more transparent environment”.

Mr Aurangzeb is discussing a new programme at a time when global creditors like the Asian Development Bank are repeatedly warning that Pakistan will continue to face challenges from substantial new external financing requirements and the rollover of old debt, exacerbated by difficult global financial conditions.

Pakistan's desperation to close a new deal with the IMF is reflective of the perilous state of its economy. In its April 2024 Asian Development Outlook report, the ADB describes Pakistan's economic prospects as uncertain, with high risks on account of the impact of political uncertainty on the sustainability of stabilisation and reform efforts. Noting that potential supply chain disruptions from the escalation of the Middle East war would weigh on the economy, it says: "With Pakistan's large external financing requirements and weak external buffers, disbursement from multilateral and bilateral partners remains crucial." It points out that the IMF support for the reform agenda would improve market sentiment and catalyse affordable external financing from other sources, but warns that "these inflows could be hampered by lapses in policy implementation".

If anything, the report suggests that Pakistan has no time to waste and no room to avoid the long-delayed reforms without causing irreparable harm to its people and economy.

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Future energy

PRIME MINISTER Shehbaz Sharif's recent directive to the energy sector to curtail Pakistan's staggering \$27bn oil import bill through robust renewable energy management is a long overdue step given our precarious financial situation. The transition to renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and hydel would undeniably shed our unsustainable reliance on oil imports. The transition would not only mitigate the fiscal haemorrhage caused by oil imports but also liberate us from the grip of the crude oil tanker 'mafia', which the PM has characterised as parasitic entities devouring national resources. Additionally, he has highlighted the need for all provinces to put a stop to power theft — an administrative problem — which is significant contributor to power losses.

These crucial measures require unwavering commitment and careful implementation. The instructions to get world-class consultants on board in order to boost the country's power transmission highlights the need for technical expertise in overhauling our aging grid, which adds to the high cost of energy because of distribution losses. Without this, any advancement in power

generation would be futile. Moreover, the shift from imported to local coal, while beneficial in reducing foreign currency expenditure, must be approached with caution considering the environmental implications. A balanced approach that gradually phases out coal in favour of cleaner alternatives is advisable. There is also a pressing need for more ambitious initiatives. For instance, incentivising private investment in renewable projects could accelerate the adoption of greener technologies. To that end, a comprehensive policy aimed at enhancing energy efficiency across industrial, commercial, and residential sectors would complement the shift to renewables. One hopes that this new focus on sustainable energy use is not lost and translates into concrete action. Only through persistent effort can we hope to see a meaningful reduction in our reliance on imported fuels. The health of our economy and the well-being of our future generations depend on it.

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Dharna inquiry

THE Supreme Court-sanctioned inquiry into the infamous Faizabad dharna of 2017 has turned out to be a damp squib. A three-member commission tasked with overseeing the inquiry recently concluded its investigation and seemingly chose to close the matter while avoiding further controversy. It signed off with some lame recommendations on the need for legislation, rules and SOPs to regulate the workings of various intelligence agencies, which, in any case, should not be involved in matters that can be handled by the civilian leadership. Describing the armed forces as the “sacred arm of the state”, the report finalised by the commission politely noted that when the institution or any of its affiliated agencies get involved in civilian matters, it is the image of the institution that is exposed to risk, especially if the outcomes of the involvement run contrary to public expectations. In the same vein, it recommended that the FC and Rangers’ troops be pulled from urban areas, seemingly so that civilian agencies can resume the roles that have gradually been taken from them and given to these paramilitary forces.

Meanwhile, the report put the blame for the botched handling of the 2017 Faizabad protests on the provincial government of the time and seemed to exonerate the then DG Rangers and DG ISI of any malfeasance in their handling

of the TLP's violent dharna on the basis of lack of supporting evidence. However, even where the report seemed to be clear about where the responsibility should be fixed, it shied away from naming individual culprits. Instead, the report's authors seemed content with the low-hanging fruit: for example, calling for cases against the protesters filed during the sit-in to be reopened and prosecuted and making routine counterterrorism-related policy recommendations that have already been discussed ad nauseam over the years. This is bound to raise eyebrows. After all, the report considers those who participated in the Faizabad dharna as terrorists, yet does not seem to want to hold accountable anyone who gave them the space to terrorise the public. Be that as it may, it is hoped that the observations and recommendations shared in the report will at least be heeded and, at best, quickly implemented. The country has suffered much from its cities periodically being held hostage by extremist outfits. It is time to put an end to such practices.

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Saudi FM's visit

AFTER a two-day stay, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, accompanied by a delegation including other ministers, wrapped up on Tuesday what appears to have been a productive visit to Pakistan. The visit is a follow-up to the meeting held between the prime minister and the Saudi crown prince at the end of Ramazan in Makkah.

As expected, economic issues, particularly Saudi Arabia's investment options in Pakistan, topped the agenda. Prince Faisal met the president and prime minister, sat in on a meeting of the military-backed Special Investment Facilitation Council, and rounded off the trip by addressing a joint presser with his Pakistani counterpart. The prince had encouraging things to say, observing that this country would see "significant benefits" on the economic front soon, while describing his time in Pakistan as "productive".

Though decades-old and multifaceted, Pakistan-Saudi ties have experienced several ups and downs over the last 10 years or so. For example, Riyadh was not pleased with our decision to stay out of the ruinous war in Yemen. Hindsight

shows that parliament made the right decision, as the Saudis themselves are now trying to quietly exit that confrontation with the Houthis.

Furthermore, Imran Khan's efforts as prime minister to organise an Islamic summit in Malaysia did not go down well with Riyadh, with the Saudis feeling that moves were afoot to create a 'parallel' OIC. Mr Khan ended up cancelling his trip to Kuala Lumpur.

However, things are now seemingly on the mend, as Pakistan seeks to attract billions of dollars in Saudi investment, and the kingdom's rulers also appear to be willing to forget the hiccups of the past. The Saudi investment programme will likely be launched with full force when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman makes his expected visit to Pakistan in the near future.

But our government should no longer expect a free lunch. The Saudis — and others — will be looking to make decent returns on their investments, and for this, there must be political continuity and transparency in our economic policies. Our focus should be on mutually beneficial projects, not handouts.

Interestingly, the Iranian president is also due in Pakistan next week, and the administration has said it is ready to go ahead with the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, despite America's displeasure with the scheme.

The government of Shehbaz Sharif will have to manage a delicate balancing act with Pakistan's traditional Saudi allies and its Iranian neighbours. Too often, Pakistan has been caught between these two regional giants, though for the most part of our history we have been allied with the Saudi camp.

Pakistan needs to cultivate good relations with both states. In particular, it should boost its economic ties with Riyadh and Tehran, and not get involved in bloc politics.

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Never-ending suffering

OVER the weekend, the world witnessed an intense spectacle when Iran launched its drone-and-missile barrage against Israel in response to Tel Aviv's bombing of Iran's consular section in Damascus. Most members of the international community counselled restraint. Western states, on the other hand, accompanied these calls with fulminations directed at Tehran for 'daring' to answer Israel in the same coin. Though most of the collective West does not want war with Iran, there were calls from Washington and certain European capitals for Iran to pay a price for targeting Israel. Unfortunately, while the Iranian projectiles targeted at the Zionist state have sparked moral outrage in Western capitals, there has not been similar condemnation of Israel's murderous assault in Gaza, which has cost nearly 34,000 lives to date. These double standards are appalling.

Israel has continued its murderous campaign in the occupied territories despite a UN Security Council resolution last month calling for a ceasefire. Tel Aviv clearly feels it does not have to adhere to international law, and can trample it underfoot. This sense of exceptionalism is encouraged by Western 'ironclad' support for Israel, even as the latter indiscriminately murders women and children. Just on Tuesday, 20 people were butchered by Israel in Gaza's refugee camps. Tel Aviv has not spared schools, hospitals or aid distribution centres. To the Zionist state, every human being in Gaza is a Hamas supporter, and thus liable to be slaughtered. UN observers have noted that since the Oct 7 attacks over 350 humanitarian sites have been targeted by Israel. Moreover, nearly 600,000 people are "one step away from famine". Yet none of these grotesque transgressions by the 'world's most moral army' are enough to arouse Western ire, though Iranian missiles crashing in the Negev elicit great shock. What is clear is that if the massacre in Gaza continues, the entire Middle East may soon be consumed by the flames of war.

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Hepatitis crisis

THE sheer scale of the crisis is staggering. A new WHO report flags Pakistan as the country with the highest number of hepatitis C cases in the world and fifth

overall in terms of the prevalence of the hepatitis B and C variants combined. With a total of 12.6m reported cases, of which 8.8m are of the C variant of the viral disease, and potentially millions more that remain undiagnosed, the country clearly has a severe health crisis on its hands. However, despite the fact that nearly 5pc of Pakistan's population suffers from hepatitis B and C and trends show an increase in prevalence over recent years, the crisis is not being discussed enough, even though these diseases are preventable with a few precautions and treatable in many cases with medical interventions. Instead, the transmission of these viruses continues to increase because proper sterilisation techniques are largely not followed. Reused syringes, transfusion of unscreened blood and inadequate sanitary conditions can become the cause of disease transmission in healthcare settings. Elsewhere, seemingly innocuous items, such as a barber's inadequately sterilised razor, can become the medium of transmission of the disease.

Pakistan must take inspiration from Egypt. Over the last decade or so, Egypt has been able to slash hepatitis C prevalence from over 10pc of its population to about 0.38pc. The WHO director general has ascribed its success to utilising "modern tools and political commitment at the highest level to use those tools to prevent infections and save lives". It is worth pointing out that, in previous years, Egypt used to rank ahead of Pakistan in terms of hepatitis B and C prevalence. However, starting in 2014, the country launched a national campaign offering free testing and treatment for hepatitis C. It tested more than 60m people and treated more than 4m, of which 99pc were cured with locally manufactured antiviral treatments. Its enviable progress was made possible thanks to the rigorous implementation of improved patient safety practices and the implementation of universal injection and blood safety procedures. This is precisely the approach Pakistan needs to adopt. The country has already demonstrated its capabilities in handling national-level health emergencies during the Covid-19 outbreak. Health authorities must now treat endemic hepatitis B and C with the same level of urgency and eliminate these painful and potentially deadly diseases with the same urgency.

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IMF's projections

THE next few years are likely to see Pakistan trapped in low-growth mode. International lenders maintain that economic growth in the country will remain subdued, hovering in the range of 1.8pc-3.5pc in the medium term because of plummeting investment, persisting fiscal and external imbalances, and a large state presence in the economy.

In its flagship World Economic Outlook 2024, released on the eve of the spring meetings of the World Bank Group, the IMF has predicted Pakistan's economy will grow by 2pc this year and 3.5pc in the next. The estimates are based on the Fund's recently concluded review of Pakistan's macroeconomic position under the \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement. Even these projections hinge on continued fiscal consolidation and a new IMF bailout. No wonder Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is in Washington to lobby for a larger, three-year Fund programme of \$6bn-8bn to support planned economic reforms.

As stated by him, the country will request a three-year programme "to help execute the structural reform agenda". Referring to reduced market volatility and economic stabilisation achieved under the SBA, he said that market sentiment was more positive in the current fiscal year. "It's really for that purpose that we have initiated the discussion with the Fund to get into a larger and an extended programme," he explained.

If approved, it will be Pakistan's 24th engagement with the IMF since 1958. Will this new programme break what the minister was reported to have referred to as the "chain of financial struggles and bailouts"?

The fact is that Pakistan has never been able to complete a longer programme with the Fund because of a breach in policy goals thanks to political reasons. What will be different this time around? So far, the minister has shown an understanding of the issues that have dragged the economy down and his commitment to implementing long-delayed structural reforms without any proviso.

"If we do not go through the structural reforms, unfortunately, we will still be looking at another programme," he told an Atlantic Council meeting. He knows what needs to be done and said that Pakistan does not require "too many policy

prescriptions”. The problems are well-known and the country is aware of what is needed to stabilise the economy. The challenge is follow-through and implementation.

Unlike his predecessors, Mr Aurangzeb intends to discuss the programme’s “growth aspects” with the IMF as well. But he has not elaborated on how he plans to grow the economy without breaching the programme policy steps that must focus on tough stabilisation reforms.

With the economy going through its worst crisis, the budget for next year is set to reveal how steadfast the government will be in its commitment to undertaking reforms, and how Mr Aurangzeb balances stabilisation with relatively faster growth.

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Melting glaciers

AFTER several rain-related deaths in KP in recent days, the Provincial Disaster Management Authority has sprung into action to minimise the chances of further loss of life, property, crop and infrastructure. Potential glacial lake outburst floods, caused by melting glaciers, are a principal concern, and administrations in nine districts have been directed to regularly monitor these rivers of ice in Chitral, Swat, Mansehra, Kohistan, Dir and Kurram, with the help of local communities, and report hazards. Once again caught unawares by unusually devastating rains in many parts of the country — especially Balochistan — it is time that the disaster management authorities reinforced flood monitoring systems in view of increasing extreme weather events that often unleash flash floods in the hilly areas and beyond.

Pakistan is facing a serious climate challenge, which is exacerbating its lingering economic crisis, and water and food insecurity, as well as increasing poverty. In September 2022, the country suffered massive losses of \$30bn in crop and infrastructure damage, and lost 1,700 lives in unprecedented floods caused by record-breaking rains. Millions of people who had lost their homes and livelihoods then, still remain displaced after almost two years. The impact of increasing climate disasters is being aggravated by the rapid melting of

Pakistan's 7,000 glaciers as inundation caused by 'outburst floods' continues to endanger the lives and property of those living in the catchment areas, forcing local communities to migrate. A third of the country's glaciers are projected to melt by the turn of this century, and saving them appears to be a lost cause. Therefore, it is imperative for disaster authorities to adapt their monitoring and response strategies as the first line of defence and improve risk management in general to contend with shrinking glaciers and climate-induced events overall. These strategies must focus on early warning systems to alert communities in time, create fiscal room to rescue and rehabilitate the affected people, and develop climate-resilient infrastructure.

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Insufficient inquiry

UNLESS the state is honest about the mistakes its functionaries have made, we will be doomed to repeat our follies. And when these mistakes concern national security and law and order issues, blame must be apportioned accordingly, and those responsible for negligence need to answer for their omissions. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court-mandated commission probing the violent 2017 TLP dharna in Islamabad has fallen short on many counts, and its findings are being pilloried by political observers. Instead of assigning responsibility in clear terms for the debacle, the report offers a milquetoast view of the dharna and its associated controversies. As Defence Minister Khawaja Asif claimed, the findings have "no authenticity or credibility". Mr Asif had particular issues with the fact that the "main characters" in the drama did not appear before the commission, referring to then army chief Qamar Bajwa and Faiz Hameed, the retired general who was then serving as the ISI's DG-C. Meanwhile, former Senate chairman Raza Rabbani observed that the report shifts blame to the Punjab government for the incident. There is much substance in this criticism. For example, then interior minister Ahsan Iqbal told the commission that Gen Faiz practically went over prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's head, as the deal with the TLP had apparently been sealed by the military before it was brought to the PM's knowledge. Mr Abbasi was apparently not pleased with this development.

Instead of tiptoeing around such prickly matters, it is exactly these issues that the commission should have investigated, particularly the fact that the authority of the highest elected official of the land was overruled by a senior intelligence officer. The military has recently initiated a probe against Gen Faiz in a separate case of abuse of power concerning a housing scheme. Therefore, there is no reason why high-ranking former officers cannot answer queries regarding their role in the Faizabad debacle. This paper has always argued that all institutions need to operate within their constitutional limits, and probes such as these offer opportunities where those limits can be clearly defined. No institution should consider it a matter of ego; rather, answering questions and cooperating in such investigations should be looked upon as a matter of duty, for the betterment of the nation. To prevent a repeat of events like the Faizabad fiasco, a wider, more transparent probe is required.

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X post facto

AS has become its modus operandi, the state is using smoke and mirrors to try to justify its decision to ban X, formerly Twitter. After weeks of denial and plain misrepresentation, including in statements made to the courts, the government recently owned up to blocking the popular social media platform for Pakistani users “in the interest of upholding national security, maintaining public order, and preserving the integrity of our nation”.

From representations made on behalf of the interior ministry before the Islamabad High Court, it appears that the ‘threat’ to Pakistan’s national security from X was flagged by intelligence agencies in a ‘confidential’ report.

The interior ministry thereafter cut off Pakistan’s access to X, seemingly without even bothering to fulfil all procedural requirements. One of the ‘justifications’ now being given by the government for this ‘punitive action’ is that X refuses to localise its operations here and “does not obey Pakistani laws”.

While the state is otherwise entitled and, indeed, expected to take any measures necessary to protect the country’s interests, it cannot do so without providing lawful justifications. In the current political climate, where there is widespread

public dissatisfaction with the state's policies, it is also rather difficult to take any claim regarding some unspecified 'threat' from social media at face value.

If there really was some clear and present danger to the country from the Pakistani people's ability to access and post on X, which necessitated an immediate ban, this ought to have been spelt out for both the courts and the general public when the X ban was first challenged in the courts. Instead, as one recalls, the government's representatives kept denying that a ban was even in place. When questioned, some of the caretaker ministers had smugly shrugged it off, telling those people who were affected to 'live with it' or use a VPN service.

It may be recalled that the X ban came in the midst of a raging controversy over the widespread manipulation of election results, right after a senior bureaucrat had issued a damning public 'confession' of his own complicity in the same. The correlation of these events, when seen in the broader context of the ongoing campaign to keep mass media in line and 'under control', would give anyone ample cause to doubt the government's rather convenient 'national interest' justification.

As far as the government's complaint regarding X's refusal to open a local office is concerned, it should realise that global tech companies are very wary of markets where regulations are opaque and subject to official whims. No company will want to move to a country where the state can quietly shut down a major global service without justification or due process. Our decision-makers should realise the harm they are causing.

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Karachi terror

IS urban terrorism returning to Karachi? Yesterday's deplorable suicide bombing attack on a van carrying five Japanese nationals in the city's Landhi area comes two years after three Chinese academics were killed by a Baloch suicide bomber at the Karachi University. The Japanese autoworkers survived the attack, but one security guard died of his injuries. They were on their way to the Export Processing Zone. According to the police, the suicide bomber was killed in the attack and his accomplice was shot dead. Law enforcers also say that the

collaborator fired 15 rounds and was equipped with grenades. While the Sindh chief minister has sought a report from the IGP, the slain associate is believed to have had links with a Baloch separatist outfit, underscoring the need for foreign nationals working on development and other projects in the country to be provided with an extra layer of security.

The violent incident cannot be taken lightly as it brings into question the vigilance and performance of the Counter-Terrorism Department and the intelligence machinery. Karachi was the venue of terror campaigns, political, sectarian and ethnic carnage for over two decades. Presently, brutal street crime afflicts it, costing too many lives daily. Therefore, law enforcement must evaluate its competence, especially when it is aware of sleeper cells in the metropolis, to keep the commercial nerve-centre from becoming an inferno again. Attempts to destabilise the city must be thwarted with precision. Although the reasons for this attack are unknown, security forces are duty-bound to intensify intelligence-gathering procedures, while the state must upgrade CT policies. Urban centres are seats of progress and power, thus hostile elements exploit flaccid security networks to target them. Moreover, the presence of paramilitary forces in Karachi should have neutralised militant groups. At a time when the economy is flagging and geopolitical temperatures are on the rise, Pakistan's growth depends on a safe environment for foreigners and investment.

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President's speech

PRESIDENT Asif Ali Zardari seems to have managed to hit all the right notes in his address to the joint sitting of parliament this Thursday. Unfortunately, given where things stand, it is difficult to take much hope from his words. One of the key points of the president's speech was that it is high time the country started moving beyond the extreme polarisation that has been plaguing it for a number of years now. This is, without doubt, something the country desperately needs as it struggles to cope with its spiralling social and economic crises. But the question remains: will Pakistanis trust Mr Zardari to lead the way? In our context, the president is the head of state and is meant to represent "the unity of the Republic". As such, the office of the presidency must uphold national values and principles, and be seen to be above partisan politics. Unfortunately, in our

history, hardly any president comes to mind who has managed to stay above the fray of politics — even after the president — ironically, Mr Zardari himself — put his signature to a constitutional amendment in 2010 that diluted the head of state's considerable powers. Given the bitterness that prevails in the parliamentary opposition — and among political parties in general — can Mr Zardari, who remains PPP-Parliamentarians' president, play a neutral role?

It was, perhaps, a reflection of these realities that his speech invited boisterous opposition from within parliament, while the three armed forces chiefs, the chief ministers of two provinces, and even the supreme leader of the PML-N, with whom the PPP is currently allied, remained no-shows. "In my considered view, it is time to turn a new page," Mr Zardari remarked at one stage; at this point, however, this seems like wishful thinking. The players seem to be realising that the political stand-off is turning into an intractable mess. There can be no moving forward till important stakeholders are ready to make major concessions to each other, but nobody appears ready to do so. The Feb 8 elections had offered Pakistan its best chance yet of making a clean break from the turmoil that continues to grip the country. However, that opportunity was lost, following allegations of large-scale rigging that further soured the atmosphere. There now seems to be no easy way to break the deadlock.

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Isfahan strikes

THE Iran-Israel shadow war has very much come out into the open. Tel Aviv had been targeting Tehran's assets for over a decade, particularly in Syria, taking advantage of the chaos engendered by that country's civil war. Moreover, a number of Iranian scientists, especially those associated with the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme, had been assassinated within Iran in hits widely considered to have been orchestrated by Israel.

While the Iranians are known for their 'strategic patience', and for playing the long game, the April 1 Israeli strike on an Iranian diplomatic facility in Damascus, in which a number of senior Iranian generals were killed, had crossed a red line. There was tremendous pressure on Iran from within to reply to this Israeli transgression, and the ayatollah and his generals had to respond without

triggering a major regional war. Tehran's response came in the shape of the April 13 assault on Israel, a barrage that was short on destructiveness, yet scored a major strategic and PR victory for Iran. The suspected Israeli strikes targeting Iranian facilities in Isfahan early on Friday are the latest move on this dangerous chessboard.

While Tel Aviv has officially kept mum about the Isfahan misadventure — Israel rarely owns up to subterfuge outside of its borders — some politicians in the Zionist state have celebrated the attacks, while American media, quoting sources, have said this is Israel's handiwork. The Iranians themselves appear to be downplaying the event, and an airbase and nuclear facilities in the area seem to be safe.

Once again, the clamour for 'de-escalation' has been echoing from global capitals. Surely a wider war is in no one's interest — except perhaps for the extremists in Israel — but true de-escalation means Israel must start behaving like a normal state, not a rogue nation that threatens the entire region, as well as the forsaken Palestinians captive in the occupied territories.

The UN secretary general has said "one miscalculation ... one mistake, could lead to the unthinkable". But this is perhaps just what Benjamin Netanyahu and the cabal of zealots in the unruly coalition that backs him may want. After all, Israel has been facing global opprobrium for its butchery in Gaza, while PM Netanyahu is facing significant domestic opposition for his handling of the debacle.

Thus, a war with Iran may be a useful distraction to shift the focus from Palestine, and rally Israel's Western friends behind it to protect the Middle East's 'only democracy' against Tehran. Suffice to say, any scenario pitting the Israeli-Western collective against Iran and its 'axis of resistance' allies will result in an explosion in the Middle East, causing oil prices to skyrocket, and global trade to be upended. To avoid this, Washington, London and Brussels need to check Israel's destabilising behaviour.

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Olympic preparations

THIS past week marked the beginning of the 100-day countdown to the Paris Olympics, with the symbolic torch-lighting ceremony. The Olympic torch will now travel through Greece before crossing the Mediterranean and proceeding to Paris for the start of the Games on July 26. Projections of victories and defeats during the world's biggest sporting event are already underway. For the athletes, it is the final stretch of a four-year journey — three years in this case after the Tokyo Olympics were held in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic — of preparing for the Games. So far, only five athletes from Pakistan have secured direct qualification. There could be more participants once the wildcards are distributed after the end of the Olympic qualifying events, but the country's hopes of halting a run of seven Olympic Games without a medal rest squarely on the broad shoulders of javelin thrower Arshad Nadeem. The 27-year-old, who won the silver at last year's World Athletics Championships to punch his ticket to Paris, is participating in a five-week training camp in South Africa, a month after undergoing laser surgery on his right knee. Arshad's achievements at the global level have come despite the fact that the only international standard javelin in his possession is out of shape. He has had to make the most of his limited opportunities to train abroad.

The situation of others is worse. The three shooters from Pakistan who have qualified for the Games — Gulfam Joseph, Ghulam Mustafa Bashir and Kismala Talat — have been training under a Russian coach in only Karachi. Equestrian Usman Khan, who has also qualified, has travelled the road of hardships on his own. There is a pressing need, especially on the part of the government, to do more for them. With sports becoming a symbol of soft power globally, the new government must dedicate time and effort, and most importantly finances, to this cause.

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IHC letter

THIS is a historic opportunity for the judiciary to define its institutional boundaries. It must not be squandered. With the Supreme Court's next hearing on the Islamabad High Court judges' 'interference' letter coming up on April 29,

the Lahore High Court has convened a full-court meeting tomorrow to solicit suggestions on “how best to protect the independence of the judiciary”. The IHC has sought similar suggestions by April 25. Citing directions issued by the SC after its April 3 hearing of the letter case, the LHC says it seeks to “put in place a mechanism to affix liability for those who undermine such independence and clarify for the benefit of individual judges the course they must take when they find themselves at the receiving end of interference and/ or intimidation by members of the executive”. It is encouraging to see the two courts taking up the matter proactively, and it would be quite helpful if the remaining three high courts — Sindh, Balochistan and Peshawar — also joined the debate. The judiciary’s deliberations on how to protect its members from attempts to coerce and control them need full participation if it is to be hoped that the solutions distilled from these discussions will endure.

Meanwhile, in a related development, the Islamabad High Court Bar Association has, through a petition filed earlier this week, formally joined calls demanding a probe into the judges’ letter. The IHCBA, which describes itself as a “primary stakeholder” in the letter case, has demanded that, once the probe is completed, the apex court must “pass appropriate orders to affix liability for those who undermined the independence of judiciary”. Other bar associations have previously weighed in on the matter, and though their respective positions may be differentiated, it seems that all stakeholders do want this matter to be settled definitively. It would therefore perhaps be best, given the circumstances, that Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa formed a full-court bench to deliberate on the contents of the judges’ letter — something which he had indicated in the last hearing that he may do. Given the seriousness of the complaints brought forth and endorsed by six serving judges, a full court would give the matter a certain weightiness while also sending a signal to those still seeking to infringe upon the judiciary’s domain that any further ingress will not be tolerated.

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Elections in India

INDIA’S mammoth multi-stage elections have begun and the popular issues gripping the voters this time are unemployment, inflation and related economic despair.

This is far removed from the divisive polls of 2014 and 2019, and it is not because pro-Hindutva campaigners are not trying to kindle the fires of communalism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has personally signalled the intent by using an election speech to attack opposition leaders as Mughal-like meat-eaters, not just ordinary lovers of mutton and fish.

Despite the enormous funds and the hard advertising put into it, the controversial Ram temple inauguration is being listed by analysts as way down in the voters' list of priorities. The perceptible absence of polarisation — usually derived from Muslim-bashing, often by falsely conjuring a Pakistan link — could bring surprises when votes are counted on June 4.

Consider the case of Navneet Rana, a feisty woman candidate for the BJP from Amravati in Maharashtra. She has been unfailingly reminding her supporters to not rest on their oars in the delusion that there is a Modi wave, or that he would see her through. "There is no Modi wave this time. Stay very vigilant." The Rana video is not the only call to toil for BJP supporters.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is a member of the Rajya Sabha and she has been quoted as turning down the BJP's offer to fight the Lok Sabha polls, saying she simply did not have the kind of money needed for the elections. This is being seen as an oblique criticism of the electoral bonds scam in which the BJP was a major beneficiary.

Ms Sitharaman is tame compared with her political economist husband Parakala Prabhakar. His book *The Crooked Timber of New India: Essays on a Republic in Crisis* is a critique of the Modi years and has predictably baffled many. Mr Prabhakar has claimed in TV interviews there would be no constitution if Mr Modi returned to power. However, he also predicts that the BJP would not cross 200 seats, 72 short of the halfway mark. Similar claims have been made by Rahul Gandhi and other opposition leaders.

Independent accounts by online media outlets and spot reports circulating on the alternative media channels are at variance with Modi-friendly TV anchors and they do not see easy victory for the prime minister.

Parallel accounts share much with the reliable pre-poll survey by the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. Even as it places Mr Modi ahead of any rival for the top job, the survey lists issues in the elections that make him vulnerable. Barring a game-changing event like Pulwama or the Muzaffarnagar riots, these Indian elections look poised to surprise everyone in the fray and in the galleries.

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Janus-faced

THE US has done it again. While officially insisting it is committed to a peaceful resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it rejected a pivotal step in the peace process itself. Its recent veto of the resolution granting full UN membership to Palestine stands in direct opposition to its professed support for a two-state solution. While 12 of the 15 members of the UNSC supported Palestine's membership, the US stood alone, isolating itself while still claiming to promote peace. Its ambivalent behaviour continues to cast a long shadow over its role as a mediator in the conflict and this action has further undermined its credibility on the world stage. What's more, leaked cables show that ahead of the vote, the Biden White House reportedly engaged in a covert lobbying effort to influence other countries to either vote against or abstain from voting. That has now come to pass. Washington's actions are evidence enough that any shred of support for a two-state solution is conditional and heavily skewed in favour of Israel.

The US may be a world power, but it is bereft of moral authority. If it hopes to regain some measure of diplomatic integrity, it should stop turning a blind eye to Israel's war crimes. It must address the ongoing extermination campaign in Gaza by Israel and its illegal settlement expansions. These actions, which violate international law, require active intervention by the US to halt. It can begin by putting an end to its Janus-faced policy. As long as it verbally tut-tuts Israel's atrocities while, in the same breath, supplies arms to it, it is complicit. Such behaviour, unfortunate in its shortsightedness, only sabotages peace. It prioritises immediate political interests over a sustainable and just solution for the conflict. As the world watches, the credibility of the US as a champion of global peace and justice stands tarnished. It must at least live up to its own words.

Raisi's visit

IRANIAN President Ebrahim Raisi, who begins his three-day trip to Pakistan today, will be visiting the country during interesting times. While bilateral relations between both states are at a decent level, there is room for significant improvement. Moreover, Pakistan-Iran ties are closely monitored by some key Arab countries, as well as the US. Aside from the bilateral perspective, the visit is of significance as Iran and Israel have been trading blows over the past several days, while the Saudi foreign minister was in the country last week, bringing promises of significant investment to Pakistan. The kingdom's de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman is also due here in the near future. Pakistan has often been caught in an uncomfortable position between its traditional ally Saudi Arabia, and its neighbour Iran, which is why visits by top Saudi and Iranian officials carry much weight, and require Pakistan to exercise deft diplomacy to maintain cordial ties with both Riyadh and Tehran. Though Saudi-Iranian ties have been improving after last year's China-backed thaw, relations between them are by no means warm. Pakistan must be wary of these dynamics while calculating its foreign policy options with both sides.

Where bilateral issues are concerned, three areas are likely to dominate Mr Raisi's visit: border security, trade and the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. A manifestly ugly episode was witnessed in January when both sides traded missile fire. The incident was triggered by the Iranians, who fired into Pakistani territory claiming to have hit anti-Iran 'militants'. Pakistan struck back, hitting Iranian territory, but both sides demonstrated maturity by climbing down and restoring ties. The Iranian president's visit offers an opportunity to review mutual security protocols to ensure that the border areas are not used by non-state actors to threaten either country's security. As far as trade goes, there is great potential, though the threat of foreign sanctions has dampened these prospects. These obstacles can be overcome by expanding border markets and opting for barter trade. Meanwhile, the stalled pipeline issue is amongst the major irritants standing in the way of better ties. While Pakistan has indicated it is ready to complete the much-delayed project, American officials have said this may attract sanctions against Pakistan. The country should not cave in to threats, and let Washington know that it must honour a sovereign agreement.

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Not without reform

FINANCE Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb says that the economy has the potential to grow 10 times its size to \$3tr for Pakistan to become a high-middle-income country by 2047. That kind of growth or economic transformation is difficult to achieve but not impossible.

India accomplished this feat to become the world's fifth-largest economy by increasing its GDP size from less than \$275bn to over \$3.7tr in 30 years after it began to implement reforms in earnest to overcome a severe crisis resulting from external debt. Ever since then, it has not returned to the IMF for help and is now well on its way to becoming the world's third-largest economy after the US and China. The latter country has grown at a very high annual rate of 10pc for decades to transform itself into the world's second-largest economy and rescue millions of its citizens from poverty.

There are also examples of countries from Southeast Asia, which were poorer and less developed than us a few decades ago but have surged far ahead now. Even if these economies have not fully overcome poverty or become high-middle-income nations, their examples show us the road to better days. But, living on borrowed money as we are, the periodic articulation of a desire to grow rich will not help.

If Pakistan is desirous of becoming a middle-income economy and halting the perennial cyclical crisis that has led Mr Aurangzeb to Washington to seek the country's 24th bailout from the IMF, it must follow the path others have successfully taken. It has to honestly and diligently implement reforms to limit the role of government in the economy, encourage the private sector to lead growth, and integrate the economy with the region and global economy by breaking down barriers to trade and investment.

These reforms, however, will have to be based on enduring fiscal stabilisation policies. A similar message was conveyed by IMF's Middle East and Central Asia director Jihad Azour the other day when he emphasised that giving precedence to reforms to revive the Pakistani economy was more important than the loan amount being negotiated. "What is important at this stage is to accelerate the

reforms, double down on the structure of reforms in order to provide Pakistan with its full potential of growth,” he said.

The problem with us is that our ruling elite is still trying to find a way around the tough reforms that will hit their privileges. The creation of SIFC as an island of facilitation for certain foreign or local investors is one example of this attitude. But it will be difficult to carry on like this. With geopolitical rent becoming more and more difficult to draw, a debt-ridden country cannot daydream its way into becoming a middle-income economy.

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Suffering in captivity

YET another animal — a lioness — is critically ill at the Karachi Zoo. The feline, emaciated and barely able to move, is suffering due to old age, according to the zoo director. However, this does little to explain the depth of neglect that has become a recurring theme at this facility. The lioness’s condition — which recently drew attention in a video on social media — is a grim reminder of past tragedies involving other creatures of the wild like elephants, lions, bears and even a young chimpanzee who died of a heart attack. Such incidents are not isolated to Karachi. Islamabad’s Marghazar Zoo was shut down after a landmark judgement, and transformed into a wildlife rescue centre following the global advocacy for Kaavan, the elephant. This not only alleviated the suffering of many animals but also set a precedent for how we should approach wildlife captivity.

Zoos, if unable to replicate near-natural habitats and ensure the welfare of their residents, should indeed be closed. The example of Islamabad should inspire Karachi to consider a similar path, possibly through privatisation, provided stringent reforms and oversight mechanisms are established. The Sindh High Court might consider intervening to safeguard these voiceless creatures, as their suffering reflects our failure as a society to protect the most vulnerable. The role of our zoos must evolve from being just exhibition spaces to centres for conservation and education. If we cannot meet these standards, it is perhaps time to rethink our approach to wildlife in captivity. Karachi Zoo must be reimagined as a sanctuary that genuinely contributes to conservation efforts, rather than being a place where animals merely survive. If we lack the resources

or the will to provide for these creatures, we must have the courage to choose a kinder alternative. Closure or new management with strict oversight — anything less would be a disservice to the captive animals. Negligence is cruelty, and it must be stopped.

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Privatising PIA

FINANCE Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's reaffirmation that the process of disinvestment of the loss-making national carrier will be concluded by the end of June or early July reinforces confidence in the government's commitment to privatisation. Reiterating the old refrain "the government has no business being in business", Mr Aurangzeb declared that the country's three main airports — in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi — are next on the list of privatisation. "We expect the bids for PIA to come in the next two to three weeks, and by the end of June or early July, we can move it to the investors," he told a news briefing at the end of his weeklong visit to Washington to discuss a new and larger medium-term package with the IMF. It is encouraging to see the minister consistently underscoring the need for privatising state-owned enterprises, which are incurring massive annual losses of Rs500bn, and have become a source of systemic risk for the national budget as well as our creditors. Yet, he, like other government officials, has never elaborated if the authorities have a clear privatisation roadmap beyond the sale of PIA and the outsourcing of airports.

The current initiative on the privatisation of the national carrier and airports is understood to have been taken under the military-backed Special Investment Facilitation Council to hand over these assets to investors from friendly Gulf countries, probably in government-to-government deals. This has generated an impression that the civil and military authorities are in a hurry to disinvest these assets for raising a few billion dollars to ease pressure on the current account and budget. While taxpayers can no longer afford to finance the state-owned resource guzzlers, the hasty pursuit of privatisation, especially PIA, might cast serious doubts over the process even if these transactions are not challenged in the courts. Multilateral lenders like the World Bank have also cautioned against the perils of a chaotic privatisation process, advising the authorities to pursue disinvestment of these assets in a planned and structured manner through a

revamped privatisation commission staffed with “able professionals who can prepare a financial model for each entity to be privatised”. Transparency and full disclosure in such transactions is crucial for inspiring public confidence in the process and avoiding complications or legal challenges for investors. This should also help the authorities fetch better prices for these assets.

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By-election trends

WHILE it is too early to deduce a definitive political trend from the provisional results of Sunday’s 21 by-polls held so soon after the Feb 8 general elections, the exercise has once again emphasised the need for the state — particularly the ECP and the administration — to work on improving the credibility of the electoral process.

Five National Assembly seats were up for grabs, while the rest of the contests were for the provincial legislatures, 12 of those for Punjab Assembly constituencies. Just as allegations of rigging and irregularities had marred the Feb 8 polls, similar accusations were levelled in a number of constituencies during the by-polls, most of which were won by PML-N candidates.

An example was the ‘confession’ of a presiding officer at a Lahore polling station. The PTI might have played up these claims, but independent observers, too, were of the view that all was not well at many polling stations in Punjab. The ECP ‘took notice’ of the apparent electoral malfeasance and sought a report. Meanwhile, violence was reported from Narowal, resulting in the death of a man near a polling station.

Whereas the by-polls should have been a straightforward process, this was not to be. Clearly, the lessons of the Feb 8 polls, as well as earlier fiascos such as the 2021 Daska by-election, have not been learnt. Unless polls in Pakistan are transparent — and seen to be so — the country’s democratic evolution will remain slow.

The ECP bears the principal responsibility for ensuring this transparency; others in the government, state and bureaucracy also have a duty to promote electoral

integrity. Unless the culture of violence and rigging is rooted out, so that the vote is the sole determinant and source of political power, the credibility of the electoral process in Pakistan will continue to remain under a cloud.

By-elections in Pakistan have generally attracted little voter interest, with voters often tending to cast their ballots in favour of the party already in the saddle. As per the provisional results, the PML-N secured two NA seats, while winning 10 provincial constituencies in Punjab. Many of these were seats that N-League candidates had already won on Feb 8.

Rather than reflecting any great triumph for the N-League narrative, as its leaders are claiming, the results are more an indication of the fact that voters want to maintain the status quo at this point in the electoral cycle.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the rigging claims, which also dominated the Feb 8 polls. They indicate that the electoral victory is not as clear as the ruling party is portraying. There is much time between now and the 2029 elections. This period should be used by all stakeholders to ensure the next elections are free of controversy.

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Working together

PAKISTAN'S democracy seems adrift, and no one understands this better than our politicians. The system has gone into stasis, with no breakthrough seen over the past month or so that could indicate the direction it may be taking in the coming days. Even the parties currently in government — especially the powerful Nawaz camp within the PML-N — seem dissatisfied with the status quo, and there appears to be a growing realisation that the fight with the PTI continues only to the detriment of all who have been sucked into it. Meanwhile, the PTI appears unsure of what to do. Having lost much of its street power post-May 9 and perhaps hoping to hold on to whatever it managed to seize on Feb 8, it seems stuck between its hawkish support base, which seems to be constantly pushing for more confrontation, and the voices of reason within its leadership, who hope to get the party through its trials without being forced to surrender more than it already has.

In this context, perhaps one can afford to be cautiously optimistic about the surprise display of bonhomie in the National Assembly this Monday, which saw both the PTI and PML-N make concessions to each other and agree on the need to cooperate and work together on House business. It would appear that the parliamentary leadership of both parties, at least, has started seeing some value in 'keeping thine enemy close' even if their respective supporters still want nothing but the worst for each other. How long this bonhomie will last is anyone's guess: the PTI leadership will not compromise on their incarcerated leader and has made it clear they want him out as a precondition for any concessions to the current political set-up. Meanwhile, former interior minister Rana Sanaullah, who is seen to be close to the elder Sharif, has extended a 'reconciliation offer' to Imran Khan, reminding him that the PML-N and PTI together can steer the country out of its present crisis. However, it seems like a very distant possibility given the gaping trust deficit separating the two. The government could, perhaps, show its goodwill by releasing all political prisoners forthwith. Meanwhile, Mr Khan must be convinced that a political resolution to the current crisis remains the most ideal path forward — not just for his party but for Pakistan in general.

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Ties with Tehran

THE official visit by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, which ends today, has been marked by mutual praise, and promises to improve ties, particularly in the economic sphere.

The significance of the trip has been enhanced by the prevailing geopolitical tensions in the region, particularly Iran's conflict with Israel, poor ties between Tehran and the Western states, especially over the former's central role in the 'axis of resistance', as well as the unpleasant episode in January when Iran and Pakistan exchanged missile strikes.

Thankfully, whatever bitterness was engendered by the latter incident seems to have been forgotten, as Pakistan rolled out the red carpet for the Iranian leader. In Islamabad, Mr Raisi met the president, prime minister and army chief, and later headed to Lahore and Karachi to meet the respective provincial leaderships.

Trade topped the Iranian president's agenda, while security issues were also discussed. Mr Raisi said the current level of bilateral trade was "unacceptable", and desired to see annual trade go up to \$10bn. Foreign sanctions, as well as the lack of proper banking channels, stand as major obstacles in enhancing bilateral commerce. Expanding the number of border markets can help remove these obstacles, and bring socioeconomic opportunities to border communities on both sides.

Pakistan also seeks to expand foreign trade to improve its economic position. While searching for trade partners across the oceans should continue, we must work to expand regional commerce. As things stand, South Asia is among the world's least integrated regions. While resuming economic ties with India is more complicated, Pakistan should strive to improve trade relations with its western neighbours, Iran and Afghanistan. This can open pathways for Pakistani products to markets in Central Asia and greater Eurasia.

Regarding security matters, violent non-state actors operating in the common border areas present challenges to both states' security. Therefore, it is welcome that an accord was signed on security cooperation. Both countries' security forces should cooperate with each other to neutralise malign actors and manage border security.

As for the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, the issue was obliquely referred to in a Pakistani statement, but there has been no major breakthrough. Mr Raisi mentioned that some actors did not want to see Pakistan-Iran relations grow. "It is not important," he said, dismissing critics. The US, meanwhile, has again cautioned that anyone doing business with Iran risks being sanctioned by America.

Pakistan must take a long-term view of this problem. While ties with the US are important, should Pakistan seek American approval for all key economic and strategic decisions? Today, the US does not want the Iran pipeline to proceed. Tomorrow, if ties between Washington and Beijing nosedive, and the US asks Pakistan to reconsider CPEC, or our defence cooperation with China, will we comply?

Campus crackdowns

WHILE most Western governments have either been gladly facilitating Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, or meekly rebuking Tel Aviv for it, many people of conscience in the West have bravely criticised the deplorable complicity of their rulers in this war on the Palestinian people. In many instances, college and university campuses in North America and Europe have been at the forefront of campaigns calling for an immediate ceasefire, and demanding answers from their leaders for their blind support of Israel. Clearly, these sustained protests are beginning to unnerve the staunch supporters of the Zionist state in Western capitals. The recent mass arrests of students and faculty on various American campuses reveal this ugly reality. Law enforcers were unleashed on protesters at many elite schools including Yale, Columbia and NYU, with over 100 arrests made. The apparent justification for the detentions is 'antisemitism'. The absurdity of this alibi is exposed by the fact that several Jewish organisations have played leading roles in protests critical of Israel.

Joe Biden has tarred the protesters with the brush of antisemitism, terming the Columbia demonstrations "reprehensible and dangerous". President Biden should know what is particularly reprehensible is the grotesque violence unleashed by Israel on Gaza, and Washington's ironclad support for it, not American students denouncing this butchery. American and other Western protesters clearly have the moral high ground here, whereas their governments have no leg to stand on. What is also shocking is that free speech in favour of Palestine is being throttled in lands that claim to be the standard bearers of democracy and human rights. Moreover, the protesting students and faculty members are calling for their institutions to divest from corporations linked to Israel. They do not want their tuition dollars "funding ... companies that profit from death". These brave individuals — many of whom have been doxxed and have put their careers and livelihoods on the line for Palestine — deserve nothing but respect.

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Global arms race

THE figure is staggering. According to the annual report of Sweden-based think tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, global military spending last year was \$2.4tr, with the figure projected to grow. In a world beset with violence, hunger and disease, this can only be good news for global arms manufacturers and the military-industrial complex. For this sector, business is booming. As per the report, the US was the top defence spender (\$916bn), while China, Russia and India followed. America is locked in a geopolitical tussle with both China and Russia. In the case of Ukraine, the US is using the former Soviet state as a proxy battleground against Moscow. Instead of de-escalating, global powers are fuelling confrontation. For example, the US has just approved a multibillion-dollar aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, with military components. This combative signal is not likely to go down well in Moscow and Beijing, while it is appalling that the US is willing to provide Israel with even more money as the latter exterminates the Palestinian people.

Clearly, the priorities of the world's richest nations are skewed. While hundreds of millions of people wallow in preventable misery, rich states are spending obscene amounts on their respective war machines. Though defence is a legitimate need of all sovereign states, arms races fuel conflict rather than prevent it. Moreover, in such a scenario, many countries of the Global South are also forced to divert scarce resources towards arms, in part to defend themselves from larger, more well-armed neighbours and adversaries. Amnesty International has noted in a recent report that the post-World War II order is close to collapse. Arguably, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East illustrate the fact that it has already collapsed. Now, it is up to the comity of nations to build a more peaceful world, or prepare for a new dark age of 'forever' wars.

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Musical chairs

THE petitioners are quite helpless. Yet again, they are being expected to wait while the bench supposed to hear appeals against an earlier Supreme Court ruling on military courts is reconstituted because some of the counsels want more 'senior judges' to be hearing the matter. It bears noting that this was

already the second bench to have heard the state's appeals against the unanimous ruling issued by five judges last October, in which the court had held that trying civilians under the opaque military justice system has no justification under the country's laws. Meanwhile, some 85 individuals — some of whom have been held for close to 10 months now — still have no clarity regarding their legal status.

It may be recalled that the now-disbanded bench had allowed military courts to issue judgements in cases where the accused were to be awarded shorter punishments. The ruling had led to 20 individuals being released prior to Eid after they were granted a 'remission' by the army chief. Though this had been seen as a kind of interim relief from the court, the decision was also criticised as it seemed to legitimise the trials that had been completed against these released individuals. The decision was not challenged, presumably in the hope of a more comprehensive ruling after Ramazan. However, it now seems that the remaining prisoners will continue to be deprived of their liberties without a verdict issued against them. At the heart of the matter is a question that affects the entire citizenry: should civilians ever be tried in secret, in military courts seen to ignore due process, for offences that pale in comparison to the serious crimes that are normally tried in civilian-run antiterrorism courts? When terrorists who murder and maim can get a trial under the country's criminal justice system, what need is there for the establishment to get involved in dispensing justice to civilians accused of rioting and arson? Is the purpose to seek legal redress against the individuals accused of various crimes, or to make an example out of them whether or not the evidence brought against them can hold up under scrutiny in a 'normal' court of law? Five Supreme Court justices had settled these questions unanimously in October last year. It defies understanding why the appeals against their decision are still dragging on.

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Business concerns

WITH the country confronting one of its gravest economic crises, it is time for the government and business community to sit together and find a way out of it and build a strong, resilient economy. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif took the

initiative when he met prominent Karachi business leaders on Wednesday to solicit their support for the government's efforts to revive the moribund economy.

"Today we need you to take a step forward and bring this rental business to an end. Let's focus on genuine industrial and agricultural growth to double exports in the next five years. It's difficult but not impossible," he told them.

He also referred to Bangladesh's economic success and how that country had transformed its economy, even though it was once considered a 'burden' on West Pakistan before secession. He promised to incorporate the business community's recommendations in a comprehensive economic growth roadmap.

However, the community had its own apprehensions. It highlighted three major areas it considers important for economic revival: restoration of severed trade relations with India, resolution of domestic political instability in the country by engaging the incarcerated PTI leader Imran Khan, and reduction in their cost of doing business through a decrease in energy prices for manufacturing. There is no doubt that these issues are impeding a positive business climate, which is required to boost private investment and economic growth. However, both the government and business community must jointly work their way around these obstructions to steer the economy out of its present crisis.

Consider the call for the normalisation of trade relations with India, for example. The present political dispensation might face resistance from some quarters towards any effort in this direction. But this should not stop the government from taking steps, no matter how small, towards reducing tensions with India, in spite of the huge difficulties involved, especially with New Delhi's hostile stance under Narendra Modi.

The PML-N leadership has expressed its desire to improve bilateral cooperation for economic progress, which could have a positive impact on overall South Asian economic cooperation. Likewise, the issue of reconciliation with Mr Khan is a tricky one. So far, Mr Khan has not shown any inclination to talk to political rivals, though he does not appear too averse to a compromise with the powers that be. Lastly, the demand for lowering energy rates for industry is hard to meet as long as Pakistan remains in an IMF stabilisation programme.

Business conditions are indeed very difficult. But should businessmen wait for better times instead of helping the government find a way out of the current mess? Finally, there are other issues such as policy inconsistency and a narrow tax base whose resolution can uplift business conditions if the business community decides to work with the government.

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After Bismah

ISMAH Maroof's contribution to Pakistan cricket extends beyond the field. The 32-year old, Pakistan's most-capped One-Day International women's cricketer, has announced her retirement after a 17-year career in which she inspired countless young women to take up the sport. Not only does the former captain retire as the country's leading international run scorer, she also leaves behind a legacy as a champion of women's rights. Just months after becoming a mother for the first time, Bismah led Pakistan at the 2022 World Cup in New Zealand where she and her daughter gained a massive following. It was the story of the tournament — a woman playing at the game's grandest stage soon after giving birth. Not just that. After she announced that she would be going on an indefinite maternity break, the Pakistan Cricket Board included a clause in central contracts for women cricketers that allocated 12 months of paid parental leave. Her sudden decision to retire, though, just after Pakistan lost a three-game ODI series at home to the West Indies, means she was unable to get the fitting farewell she deserved. Bismah had been named in the squad for the Twenty20 series against the West Indies that began on Friday but perhaps she felt she had run her race having scored just 91 runs across the three ODIs.

Pakistan now face the challenge of replacing the prolific Bismah. That task will fall on the shoulders of the reconstituted selection committee, which has been expanded to seven members to cast a wider net for potential women players. The hope is that with more investment in women's cricket, new talent will emerge. Bismah might have retired but she remains an asset to Pakistan cricket and the PCB could use her expertise in mentoring fresh talent — not just in terms of cricketing skills but also in how women cricketers can become role models for the next generation of aspiring players.

Freedom to report?

AN accountability court has barred former prime minister Imran Khan and his wife from criticising the establishment and the judiciary. This order, coupled with directives that restrict the media's ability to report on these statements, raises serious concerns. The media's role in society is to inform the public and offer a platform for diverse voices, including those of individuals on trial. When the court curtails this function to preserve "judicial decorum", it inadvertently casts a shadow on the need for justice to be seen to be done. The court's request for the media to refrain from highlighting "political or inflammatory" statements by Mr Khan, as per Pemra guidelines, is another dimension where the essence of media freedom is being challenged. The guidelines are ostensibly designed to prevent matters that are sub judice from being discussed in the media. However, when applied in a manner that effectively shields public institutions from scrutiny, they serve as tools for stifling criticism and depriving the public of crucial information. In democratic societies, the media serves as a watchdog, a guardian of public interest. When journalists are asked to selectively report, or worse, to ignore, certain aspects of legal proceedings, the very foundation of democracy is weakened. Media freedom must prevail; it is not just a right but a necessity for maintaining the checks and balances that hold the powerful accountable.

The restrictions placed on media reporting in Mr Khan's case are indicative of a broader pattern of eroding media freedoms. It is a matter that should concern every citizen, for it strikes at the very heart of basic democratic principles: transparency, accountability, and the right to a fair trial. The judiciary and the government should reconsider these prohibitions and ensure that Mr Khan's trials, like those of his predecessors, are conducted in an open court. Only then can justice prevail. Furthermore, the continued insistence on holding Mr Khan's trials within the confines of Adiala Jail, rather than in a regular courtroom, merits scrutiny. In the past, high-profile leaders, including prime ministers, all faced their trials in court, regardless of the security risks involved. These precedents underline a concerning deviation in Mr Khan's case. It is incumbent upon the state to ensure the security of an undertrial prisoner, and to facilitate their right to a public hearing.

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Missing links

THE deplorable practice of enforced disappearances is an affront to due process and the rule of law. Pakistan has struggled for decades to root out this evil, with various dispensations promising to recover the 'missing'.

These efforts have met with varying degrees of success, but the fact is that people continue to 'disappear' in the country. Civil society and the courts, as well as the relatives of the missing, have maintained pressure on the state to trace disappeared individuals and to abide by the law when detaining suspects.

The current administration has, like those before it, promised to look into the issue. The federal law minister told a media briefing recently that the Islamabad High Court-mandated committee probing enforced disappearances was being reformed. He observed that though the issue could not be solved "overnight", the reconstituted body would have a "parliamentary presence".

While it is welcome that the government appears to be serious about the issue of missing persons, it should be remembered that this is at least the third official body probing the problem. Aside from the aforementioned committee, the Supreme Court had formed in 2011 a Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, while upon the provincial high court's orders, Balochistan's administration had constituted a similar body in 2022.

It would not be wrong to say that numerous commissions or committees will not end the practice, though these bodies may be important. Instead, what is required is the will of the state to ensure that all individuals picked up by security agencies are done so as per the law, their families are informed of their detention, and they have access to counsel to defend themselves in court.

Perhaps the government's move to include parliamentary oversight of the committee could bring more transparency and ensure that those within the state machinery responsible for illegal detentions are held accountable. The state will have to pursue this issue with determination and empathy, and pledge to reform its practices so that they are in consonance with constitutional demands, and the requirements of due process.

Sadly, in the past, certain state functionaries, among them those occupying the highest offices in the land, have belittled the issue, making controversial claims that many people 'disappear' on their own. Such a condescending attitude will not help end this practice. According to the Supreme Court-mandated commission, 23pc of cases are still pending.

The state's job should be to solve all the remaining cases, and make sure that no more are added to the list of the missing. Pakistan can very much battle insurgency, terrorism and crime using the tools available within the law. As the past decades have shown, the country has not been made more secure by 'disappearing' people suspected of wrongdoing.

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Return to the helm

NAWAZ Sharif is set to take up the reins of PML-N party president once again — seven long years after he was barred from holding the position following his disqualification as prime minister in the Panama Papers case.

Today, with cases against him a thing of the past, Mr Sharif will formally assume the party position that, in his stead, had been filled by his younger brother PM Shehbaz Sharif. Publicly, his party may say that while this is a welcome development, there should be no deep speculation about what the move means for PML-N affairs. After all, PM Sharif's decisions have been endorsed by his elder brother.

But given the country's state of affairs, the delicate state of civil-military relations and the role of the judiciary, the formal return of Nawaz Sharif to the helm of party affairs is significant. No doubt, the younger Sharif's decisions largely have the blessings of his elder brother, but it is no secret that there is a difference of tone between the two when it comes to setting the party narrative.

While one prefers to avoid rocking the boat and is open to taking direction, the other has a penchant for asserting himself and challenging the existing dynamics of power. That latter narrative was conspicuously absent during the PML-N

leaders' election campaign — a factor that some of the more vocal party members say contributed to the PML-N's poor electoral performance.

The PML-N's internal dynamics have been turbulent, with important voices like Rana Sanaullah, Saad Rafique, and Javed Latif expressing differing opinions on party policies and the role of the military in politics. Mr Sanaullah's recent statements about 'undoing the injustice' of Nawaz Sharif's disqualification reflect a sense of grievance that has not entirely dissipated, and hint at undercurrents of discontent within the party.

With Nawaz Sharif as PML-N president, will we see more such grievances being aired? The PML-N's future direction will depend heavily on his ability to build consensus within the party and to manage the inevitable tensions that arise from differing opinions.

Nawaz Sharif's return to the position of party president comes at a time when the economy is under immense strain, with inflation soaring and public discontent rising. The political landscape is equally fraught, with the establishment casting a dark shadow over any attempt at political autonomy.

More importantly, at 74 years of age, and less energetic and spirited than he was seven years ago, Mr Sharif's health and stamina will reflect in his decision-making and the party meetings he chairs.

He will have to deftly navigate through tumultuous waters, but whether he can strike a balance between asserting democratic authority and avoiding direct confrontation with the establishment remains to be seen. Will buried hatchets remain buried? Time will tell.

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Unvaxxed & vulnerable

AS we mark World Immunisation Week, it is a time to reflect on the importance of vaccines, especially for children, and more so in the backdrop of an alarming rise in vaccine-preventable diseases across Pakistan. Measles has spiked in the last four years, with 122 outbreaks in Sindh alone in the past year. Measles — which

is highly contagious — can bring with it severe complications and fatalities, particularly in children under five. This surge in measles and other preventable infections such as diphtheria and polio — now only endemic to Pakistan and Afghanistan — is a telling indictment of the lapses in our immunisation efforts. These efforts no doubt continue to be plagued by significant vaccine hesitancy triggered by the controversial use of vaccination campaigns to track down Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The ensuing backlash from extremist groups has included the brutal targeting of vaccine workers, adding another layer of complexity to the issue. To make matters worse, disinformation and misinformation about the intent and safety of vaccines abound, leaving many unvaccinated and vulnerable.

It is a sad state of affairs given that vaccinations have contributed to a 40pc reduction in global infant mortality rates since 1974. More recently, vaccines restored normalcy to a world that was ground to a halt by the coronavirus. But for those looking to get immunised against newer strains of the virus, there is a dearth of booster shots. Similarly, while a vaccine to protect against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis is available for children, boosters for adults are unavailable — the CDC recommends adults get a pertussis booster every 10 years, with a great emphasis that pregnant women get the shot to pass on immunity to babies. Even deadly mosquito-borne illnesses like dengue and malaria have vaccines, but they are virtually unheard of in Pakistan. The state must restore trust in vaccines. It can do so by engaging clerics and local leaders to help dispel myths and educate communities about the benefits of vaccinations. For their part, health authorities must ensure a stable supply of vaccines through improved procurement processes and ideally by increasing local production capabilities. Additionally, strengthening the cold chain infrastructure is vital to maintain vaccine efficacy. Pakistan's approach to the coronavirus challenge was commendable; it must tackle other preventable diseases with the same seriousness.

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Gaza's hell

IT has been a little over 200 days since Israel unleashed its monstrous war of annihilation in the Gaza Strip last October. In these six months, and counting, the

Palestinian people have suffered at the hands of the Israeli war machine the worst that humanity is capable of. Their children have been slaughtered, their homes reduced to rubble, while they have been forcibly starved by a cruel adversary and its heartless, and incredibly powerful, international backers. While the governments of most Muslim states have expressed their 'sincere' regrets as the butchery continues, others with a conscience, such as South Africa and Nicaragua, have moved international fora to help end this genocidal violence. But Israel respects no law. The latest proof of that is the discovery of mass graves — containing hundreds of bodies — at the Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis. The discovery was made after the Israeli military withdrew from the medical facility. Clearly, the Israelis have studied what the Nazis did to their forebears with great precision, and are applying these 'lessons' to the defenceless Palestinians.

Yet there is a silver lining to the ongoing nightmare in the shape of the growing protest movement shaking campuses across the Global North. While the movement began in the US, protests are also taking place in Europe and Australia. They indicate that young people, students, faculty members and civil society in these states have had enough of the complicity of their governments in Israel's genocidal campaign. While the sight of tiny corpses of Palestinian children murdered by Israel are not enough to move Western 'statesmen' to end their blanket support for Tel Aviv, perhaps they may moderate their policies if a significant percentage of Western voters punish them at the ballot box. Unless the international community musters the courage to say that 34,000 Palestinian deaths are simply unacceptable, Gazans will continue to endure this living hell.

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Trying harder

IT is a relief that Pakistan managed to salvage some pride. Pakistan had taken the lead, then fell behind before winning the final game, which helped them level the five-match Twenty20 International series against New Zealand. The 2-2 result — after the opening match had been washed out — against the tourists, who were missing several of their big guns, should be a revelation for Pakistan ahead of the World Cup in June, even though skipper Babar Azam claimed this series would largely test bench strength as well as different combinations. For all

the talent at their disposal, expectations had been much higher. Pakistan's squad included top performers of the Pakistan Super League and Babar said the team would try to improve. It should start with the batting where Pakistan's inability to post big scores continues. While there was a lot of rotation during the series, openers Babar and Saim Ayub featured in every game. While Babar, who returned to the opener's slot after being reinstated as captain, got runs and also upped his strike rate, young Saim failed to make an impact. Shaheen Shah Afridi showed he remains Pakistan's premier pace option. Mohammad Rizwan remains indispensable, a fact proven after he was ruled out injured. Fakhar Zaman responded with runs in both the games he played. Shadab Khan showed he is Pakistan's top all-rounder. Spinners Abrar Ahmed and Usama Mir as well as pacer Abbas Afridi staked their claim but were not consistent enough.

The series against New Zealand has shown there are places up for grabs in the starting XI, but it also made clear that more work needs to be done to find the winning combination ahead of the World Cup in the West Indies and US. For now, Pakistan appear to be a work in progress. With the series against Ireland and England next month, we will soon have a better picture of where the team stands.

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Afghan repatriation

COMPARED to the roughshod manner in which the caretaker set-up dealt with the issue, the elected government seems a lot more patient where the repatriation of Afghan nationals is concerned. According to a recent news report, the validity of the Proof of Registration cards given to Afghan refugees has been extended to June 30 this year so that they may continue to avail education, banking and other facilities in Pakistan. Perhaps the decision could have come a little sooner, considering that these cards had previously been valid till April 1. One hopes that no one was made to suffer any inconvenience over the delayed decision. Nonetheless, it is welcome news that the elected government is being more accommodating where the rights of refugees are concerned — one recalls the brutish manner in which the 'repatriation' drive began, with hundreds of thousands of Afghan men, women and children rounded up and placed in holding camps near the border to be 'sent home' to Afghanistan. A recalibration was

much needed. Considering the human costs involved, repatriation must be done as humanely as possible without injuring the dignity of those being told to leave.

While it is still early days, it appears that the policy of returning aliens who have called Pakistan home in recent years will stay in place. Ideally, a country should be open to all, to live in and be free as long as they agree to respect its customs and laws and promise to contribute to its social, cultural and economic development. However, considering the challenges being faced by Pakistan and its depleting resources, those who make our national policies believe it is time the country excused itself from hosting anyone not entitled to its citizenship. Those championing this line of reasoning believe Pakistan is well within its rights and international laws to demand all refugees to leave. If this is the consensus, then so be it. However, the new government would send a much more positive message if it shows itself to be accommodative of those with Afghan ancestry but who were born in Pakistan, as well as the men and women who have married here. The two countries share a deep social bond which cannot be aborted through a sudden policy change. The process must play out, but it must be completed with due consideration for the human rights of those affected.

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Weathering the storm

THE year 2023 is a sobering reminder of the tumultuous relationship Asia has with climate change and how this change appears to be gaining momentum each year. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, Asia bore the brunt of climate and weather disasters last year, with temperatures in the region climbing almost 2°C above the historical average. This warming has led to more frequent and severe weather phenomena, from debilitating heatwaves to devastating floods. Pakistan finds itself grappling with these realities early this year.

The National Disaster Management Authority has issued warnings of ongoing severe weather conditions likely to persist until April 29, including potential flooding and storms that threaten to disrupt lives and livelihoods. These alerts come in the wake of a series of weather-induced calamities since February that have inflicted significant damage, with the death toll rising and infrastructure strained. This escalating frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters

makes evident the need for Asian countries to bolster their meteorological capabilities and disaster preparedness.

For Pakistan, the challenge is twofold. Firstly, there is a pressing need to enhance the capacity and resources of the NDMA and provincial meteorological departments. This means investing in advanced forecasting technologies and expanding early warning systems to ensure timely and accurate weather updates. Secondly, we need a strategy for climate resilience. This would involve building and updating infrastructure to withstand extreme weather, ensuring sustainable agricultural practices so our food sources remain secure, and empowering local populations through community-based disaster-risk management programmes.

Every citizen must be made aware of their role in disaster preparedness and response. Moreover, the plight of farmers, highlighted by recent storms affecting the wheat harvest in Punjab, makes a strong case for agricultural reforms. Policies that support crop insurance, improve access to weather-resistant seed varieties, and promote water conservation techniques are vital. Such reforms will help stabilise agricultural output and safeguard farmers' incomes against the caprices of climate.

On a regional level, Asian countries must work closely on climate action initiatives. Sharing technology, knowledge, and strategies can amplify individual efforts and lead to regional resilience. Global cooperation, too, is key. Developed nations need to support vulnerable regions through funding, technology transfer, and capacity-building initiatives.

The writing is on the wall. The time for incremental steps is over. The scale of the challenge requires bold, decisive actions that reflect the urgency of the moment. For Pakistan, and Asia at large, building resilience is no longer a matter of choice but a necessity for survival in an era marked by unprecedented climatic upheaval. As we advance through 2024, let this be the year when we all proactively ensure that our communities are safeguarded and that the future is secure against the inevitable next storm.

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Meaningless appointment

THE PML-N's policy of 'family first' has once again triggered criticism. The party's latest move in this direction has been to name Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar as the deputy prime minister, which, together with the timing of the appointment, defies all logic. It points to not only confusion within the House of Sharif but also misplaced priorities. For starters, the fact that there is to be a deputy prime minister is itself surprising. The role has no constitutional basis, though it has been previously invoked a few times as a ceremonial title — or to mend bruised egos. The late Nusrat Bhutto was given the title as a symbolic gesture in the late 1980s, while in 2012, the appointment of Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi to the position was reluctantly agreed to by the PPP after weeks of negotiations with the PML-Q, and with a clear disclaimer that the role had no prime ministerial powers "whatsoever". The historical insignificance of this role begs the question: what responsibilities will Mr Dar assume? And how will his appointment impact the foreign ministry that he currently leads? It is ironic that after being denied the post of finance minister, Mr Dar will now, in effect, be the finance minister's boss. In fact, despite being rejected, Mr Dar was still included in key committees, which many saw as an attempt to undermine the incumbent finance minister — a sentiment witnessed during the PDM's rule when Miftah Ismail held the position.

Officially, Mr Dar's appointment notification has come from the Prime Minister's Office, but given the dynamics of the Sharif family, it is evident that it was actually sanctioned by Nawaz Sharif. Not only is Mr Dar a close relative of Mr Sharif's, he is also his trusted lieutenant. Why Mr Sharif felt the need to extend this generosity ought to be explained. There are far more important issues for the government to focus on than frivolous appointments.

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Monetary policy

ALIGNING its decision with the trend in developed economies, the State Bank has acted wisely by holding its key policy rate steady at 22pc. The bank rightly argues that the continuation of a tighter monetary policy stance, with positive real interest rates, is important to "bring inflation down to the target range of 5-7pc by September 2025". The bank has held its ground in spite of mounting pressure

from the business community to commence rate cuts in view of significant positive interest rates on the back of the slowing pace of inflation. This shows that it sees escalation in global oil and commodity prices (with the situation in the Middle East worsening), budgetary stabilisation measures, the expected resolution of circular debt in the energy sector amid negotiations for a new IMF programme, and monetary easing delays by advanced economies, as risks to the near-term inflation outlook.

Indeed, those calling for rate cuts make a compelling argument. Headline inflation has declined by about 10 percentage points in the last three months and is anticipated to remain in the range of 15-17pc for the next 12-month period. Thus, positive rates have created room for the start of monetary easing. The rupee and foreign exchange reserves are stable amid an improving current account balance. Besides, they point out, while the economy is showing signs of modest recovery from last year's contraction of 0.2pc, growth remains subdued and is causing unemployment. Businesses are in a crisis due to record-high financial costs and are having problems servicing their loans. The banks have reported that bad loans rose to Rs62bn in 2023, the highest in 13 years, amid negative private credit growth. However, the counter-argument is more compelling. Current levels of inflation are still high despite expectations of further decline. More crucially, the economic 'stability' achieved in recent months is fragile as lower rates will revive demand, rapidly increasing imports, bringing the currency under pressure, and unanchoring inflation expectations. Last but not the least, the expected delay in US rate cuts means that the State Bank will have to remain vigilant about its impact on global economic trends. Therefore, rather than succumbing to temptation or pressure for monetary easing, the bank has acted prudently to keep real rates significantly positive until domestic and global inflationary risks completely subside.

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All this talk

IT is still early days, but there have been several small developments over the past week that, it is hoped, may add up to something bigger in the coming future.

The ice between the government and opposition benches, which began to show signs of a thaw last week, seems to have melted some more over the weekend, and the two factions are apparently in agreement that negotiations can help break the current deadlock. However, it is also becoming clear that there will be some major stumbling blocks.

For one, the PTI clearly does not know what it wants. Over the weekend, its leaders issued conflicting statements regarding whom they want to parley with and what their preconditions are for the talks. It would appear that the party is still seeking a settlement with the establishment, while some of the conditions it has set for the dialogue seem like a very long shot.

There will be progress only when the two factions can differentiate between dialogue and surrender. For example, the PTI may feel it has a moral right to demand its 'stolen' seats back from the government, but it cannot expect the latter to simply hand over its leverage in such a manner. The party ought to realise that any talks will only take place within the existing power configuration, even if its legitimacy is up for debate. Its other demand — the release of imprisoned leaders, including Imran Khan — is reasonable and, in fact, the government should consider facilitating this at the earliest.

The inaccessibility of key central leaders is contributing to the confusion within the PTI's ranks, which will continue to make any talks with it next to impossible. Any negotiation needs to be publicly sanctioned by the PTI founder, even if he does not participate in it himself. Otherwise, it would mean nothing in the eyes of the party's zealots.

Lastly and most importantly, it would be most disappointing if the PTI repeats the mistake of turning to the establishment instead of negotiating directly with its rivals — something which it is shockingly still not averse to. It is an unfortunate reality of Pakistan's power politics that every party wants to engage directly with the security establishment.

However, there is an opportunity right now for democratic forces to retake the legislative domain as long as they agree to respect each other. Regardless of how many seats it believes it won, the PTI does not represent every citizen of Pakistan. The other parties are equally legitimate stakeholders in the country's political future, and it must give them due consideration. The PTI need only look at how the PDM fared in the Feb 8 elections to realise how sour non-political 'solutions' to political problems can become.

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DAWN Vocabulary April 2024

1. **Bailout** - Financial assistance to a failing business or economy to save it from collapse.
2. **Circumvented** - Find a way around (an obstacle or rule).
3. **Coalition** - An alliance for combined action, especially a temporary alliance of political parties.
4. **Disbursement** - The payment of money from a fund.
5. **Efficacy** - The ability to produce a desired or intended result.
6. **Exacerbated** - Make (a problem, bad situation, or negative feeling) worse.
7. **Fiscal** - Relating to government revenue, especially taxes.
8. **Geopolitical** - Relating to politics, especially international relations, as influenced by geographical factors.
9. **Impunity** - Exemption from punishment or freedom from the injurious consequences of an action.
10. **Influx** - An arrival or entry of large numbers of people or things.
11. **Lethargy** - A lack of energy and enthusiasm.
12. **Marginalised** - Treat (a person, group, or concept) as insignificant or peripheral.
13. **Mediation** - Intervention in a process or relationship; intercession.
14. **Monopoly** - The exclusive possession or control of the supply of or trade in a commodity or service.
15. **Nefarious** - (Typically of an action or activity) wicked or criminal.
16. **Opaque** - Not able to be seen through; not transparent.
17. **Pendulum** - Used to refer to the tendency of a situation to oscillate between one extreme and another.
18. **Perennial** - Lasting or existing for a long or apparently infinite time; enduring or continually recurring.
19. **Precarious** - Not securely held or in position; dangerously likely to fall or collapse.

20. **Prerogative** - A right or privilege exclusive to a particular individual or class.
21. **Prognosis** - The likely course of a disease or ailment.
22. **Reform** - Make changes in (something, typically a social, political, or economic institution or practice) in order to improve it.
23. **Resilient** - Able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions.
24. **Stagnation** - The state of not flowing or moving.
25. **Subsidy** - A sum of money granted by the government or a public body to assist an industry or business so that the price of a commodity or service may remain low or competitive.
26. **Sustainable** - Able to be maintained at a certain rate or level.
27. **Synergy** - The interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects.
28. **Systemic** - Relating to a system, especially as opposed to a particular part.
29. **Tangible** - Perceptible by touch.
30. **Transparency** - The condition of being transparent.
31. **Vicissitudes** - Changes of fortune typically encountered in life or nature.
32. **Ameliorate** - To make something bad or unsatisfactory better.
33. **Arbitrate** - To reach an authoritative judgement or settlement.
34. **Autonomy** - The right or condition of self-government.
35. **Bilateral** - Having or relating to two sides; affecting both sides.
36. **Congruence** - Agreement or harmony; compatibility.
37. **Conundrum** - A confusing and difficult problem or question.
38. **Demagogue** - A political leader who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument.
39. **Dichotomy** - A division or contrast between two things that are represented as being opposed or entirely different.
40. **Disenfranchised** - Deprived of the right to vote or other rights of citizenship.
41. **Embezzlement** - Theft or misappropriation of funds placed in one's trust or belonging to one's employer.

42. **Equilibrium** - A state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced.
43. **Expedite** - Make (an action or process) happen sooner or be accomplished more quickly.
44. **Filibuster** - An action such as a prolonged speech that obstructs progress in a legislative assembly.
45. **Gerrymandering** - Manipulate the boundaries of (an electoral constituency) so as to favor one party or class.
46. **Hegemony** - Leadership or dominance, especially by one state or social group over others.
47. **Imperative** - Of vital importance; crucial.
48. **Incongruous** - Not in harmony or keeping with the surroundings or other aspects of something.
49. **Indemnity** - Security or protection against a loss or other financial burden.
50. **Litigious** - Concerned with lawsuits or litigation.
51. **Moratorium** - A temporary prohibition of an activity.
52. **Nepotism** - The practice among those with power or influence of favoring relatives or friends, especially by giving them jobs.
53. **Ostensible** - Stated or appearing to be true, but not necessarily so.
54. **Paradigm** - A typical example or pattern of something; a model.
55. **Polarize** - Divide or cause to divide into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs.
56. **Precipitate** - Cause (an event or situation, typically one that is bad or undesirable) to happen suddenly, unexpectedly, or prematurely.
57. **Recalcitrant** - Having an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline.
58. **Redress** - Remedy or set right (an undesirable or unfair situation).
59. **Sagacity** - Acuteness of mental discernment and soundness of judgment.
60. **Ubiquitous** - Present, appearing, or found everywhere.
61. **Accrue** - Be received by someone in regular or increasing amounts over time.
62. **Benevolent** - Well-meaning and kindly.

63. **Capitulate** - Cease to resist an opponent or an unwelcome demand; surrender.
64. **Clandestine** - Kept secret or done secretly, especially because illicit.
65. **Conflate** - Combine (two or more sets of information, texts, ideas, etc.) into one.
66. **Demarcate** - Set the boundaries or limits of.
67. **Disparage** - Regard or represent as being of little worth.
68. **Effigy** - A sculpture or model of a person.
69. **Exonerate** - (Of an official body) absolve (someone) from blame for a fault or wrongdoing.
70. **Foment** - Instigate or stir up (an undesirable or violent sentiment or course of action).
71. **Gratuitous** - Uncalled for; lacking good reason; unwarranted.
72. **Harbinger** - A person or thing that announces or signals the approach of another.
73. **Idiosyncrasy** - A mode of behavior or way of thought peculiar to an individual.
74. **Intransigent** - Unwilling or refusing to change one's views or to agree about something.
75. **Juxtapose** - Place or deal with close together for contrasting effect.
76. **Languish** - Lose or lack vitality; grow weak or feeble.
77. **Mollify** - Appease the anger or anxiety of (someone).
78. **Nebulous** - In the form of a cloud or haze; hazy.
79. **Onerous** - (Of a task, duty, or responsibility) involving an amount of effort and difficulty that is oppressively burdensome.
80. **Pernicious** - Having a harmful effect, especially in a gradual or subtle way.
81. **Quintessential** - Representing the most perfect or typical example of a quality or class.
82. **Reprehensible** - Deserving censure or condemnation.
83. **Scrupulous** - (Of a person or process) diligent, thorough, and extremely attentive to details.
84. **Tantamount** - Equivalent in seriousness to; virtually the same as.

85. **Unilateral** - (Of an action or decision) performed by or affecting only one person, group, or country involved in a particular situation, without the agreement of others.
86. **Vindicate** - Clear (someone) of blame or suspicion.
87. **Writ** - A form of written command in the name of a court or other legal authority to act, or abstain from acting, in a particular way.
88. **Zealous** - Having or showing zeal (great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause or an objective).
89. **Abrogate** - Repeal or do away with (a law, right, or formal agreement).
90. **Bucolic** - Relating to the pleasant aspects of the countryside and country life.
91. **Decimate** - Kill, destroy, or remove a large percentage or part of.
92. **Emanate** - (Of something abstract but perceptible) issue or spread out from (a source).
93. **Facetious** - Treating serious issues with deliberately inappropriate humor; flippant.
94. **Glib** - (Of words or the person speaking them) fluent and voluble but insincere and shallow.
95. **Holistic** - Comprehending the parts of something as intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole.
96. **Immutable** - Unchanging over time or unable to be changed.
97. **Laudable** - (Of an action, idea, or goal) deserving praise and commendation.
98. **Mitigate** - Make less severe, serious, or painful.
99. **Nullify** - Make legally null and void; invalidate.
100. **Ostentatious** - Characterized by vulgar or pretentious display; designed to impress or attract notice.