



DAWN

EDITORIALS

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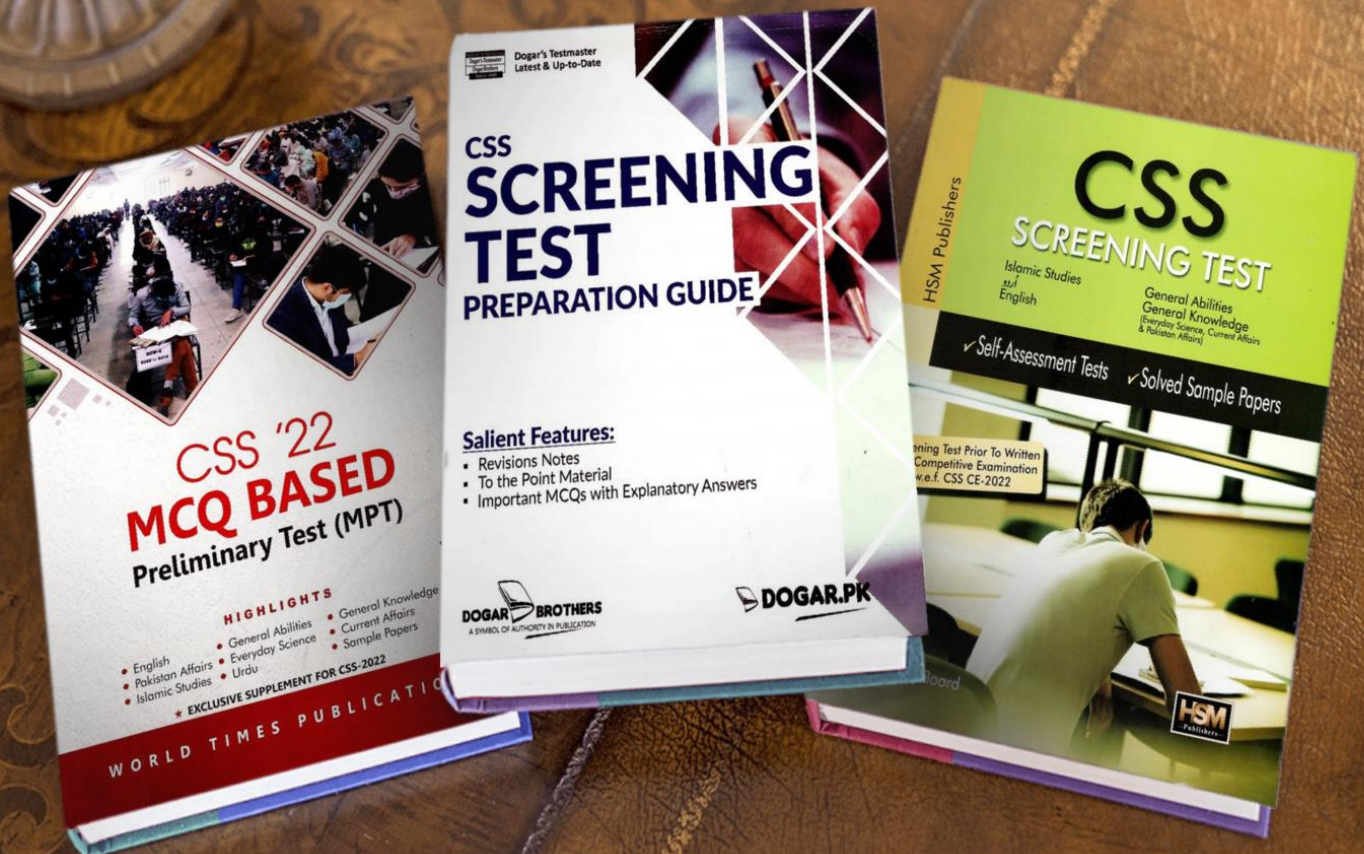
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Monster of circular debt

NOW that the staff-level agreement has been finalised between Islamabad and the IMF to restart the suspended \$6bn funding, the government appears to be looking at different options to reduce the increasing debt stock in the energy sector as agreed with the international lenders.

One such scheme, as outlined by adviser on finance Shaukat Tarin in recent weeks, wants the energy heavyweights listed on the PSX, in which the government has major stakes, to start announcing dividends for their shareholders.

The payout the government expects to receive from these companies as a shareholder would automatically get adjusted against the debts it owes to them but that it cannot pay off because of the cash crunch. By Mr Tarin's own estimation, the plan will help reduce the existing stock of circular debt by Rs300bn-Rs400bn.

Prima facie, the proposed plan looks doable and must supplement the efforts to curtail the stock of the power sector debt. The debt has already spiked to nearly Rs2.5tr and could jeopardise the power sector's viability and threaten Pakistan's energy security. But this is not the first scheme proposed for overcoming the menace of the fast-growing circular debt. We have seen many proposals in the past to liquidate the debt. But none has worked so far, at least not in the way they were intended to.

Will the authorities pull it off this time? It's hard to say at this moment with details still being worked out by the relevant ministries. In its announcement of the staff-level agreement with Islamabad, the IMF appreciated measures such as the adoption of the amended Nepra Act, notification of pending quarterly power tariff adjustments and the revision of power purchase agreements with the IPPs.

Most of these steps have only added to the burden on hapless power consumers rather than resolving the circular debt situation. The crisis facing the energy sector cannot be tackled sustainably without taming the many elephants in the room: massive distribution losses, widespread power theft and huge unrecovered bills from all consumers.

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Covid funds controversy

A COMPREHENSIVE and detailed report by the auditor general of Pakistan on the utilisation of Covid-19 funds by the government has raised grave concerns about misappropriations. It has been reported that it was only under IMF pressure that the government agreed to release the report. This suggests that without this pressure, the government was not willing to share with the citizens these serious allegations which must be probed on a priority basis.

According to the report, the Utility Stores Corporation has the most to answer for in terms of its procurements, quality controls and other violations of standard procedures. Various other government agencies, including the National Disaster Management Authority and the Ehsaas Programme also need to come clean about the objections raised by the AGP.

The PTI government had allocated a substantial budget for Covid relief and had claimed that this money would be utilised to help the financially weaker segments of society cope with the fallout of lockdowns and other Covid-related economic issues. However, it now turns out, as per the AGP report, that these very large sums of money were not managed very well. In fact, if the report is not refuted with evidence, it would suggest financial misappropriation and embezzlement on a very large scale. It would also raise very disturbing questions about the way that government organisations are being run and how the political oversight concerning them is weak and incompetent.

The federal government needs to come clean on all these matters and provide a detailed explanation on each of the red flags raised by the AGP's report. At the same time, it also needs to inform the citizens why it was attempting to keep this damning report away from them and released it only under pressure from the IMF. The numbers involved are too high and the allegations levelled too serious to be ignored.

This is why it is rather strange that the NCOC is also silent on the matter. As the main coordinating body for all Covid-related activities, NCOC must ensure that the AGP report is explained to the satisfaction of citizens. The NCOC has performed well and is held up as an example of success where most countries have failed to tackle the Covid threat. However, the AGP report also casts a dark

shadow on the NCOC because it was after all the umbrella that covered all activities linked to Covid-19 and the government's policies.

If these serious and specific questions of misappropriations in the AGP report are not addressed by the NCOC, they can threaten to undo the good work that the NCOC has done over the past two years. It is hoped the government will move swiftly to address every single concern in the report and take stern action wherever a wrongdoing is proved. There is no time to waste.

Published in Dawn, December 1st, 2021

Sindh LG law

THE Sindh Local Government Act, 2013, introduced by the PPP to roll back the Musharraf-era local bodies system in the province, has long been derided by opposition parties for disenfranchising the urban areas, particularly Karachi. Now, it appears that the legislation designed to amend the provincial LG law, the Local Government (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which was passed by the Sindh Assembly last week, has failed to address the criticism in a satisfactory way. In fact, opposition parties have unanimously condemned it. While addressing a workers' convention in Karachi on Sunday, federal minister and PTI leader Asad Umar said the new legislation has introduced a "fake local government system" that will not empower the local bodies in the metropolis, while the MQM, JI and PSP have also poured scorn on the new law. From the information available, it seems that the new law will not completely empower the Karachi mayor, leaving him or her at the mercy of the provincial government, while key municipal functions such as water, solid waste management, building control, etc will not completely be under the elected mayor's control. However, the new law intends to replace the district municipal corporations with the town system that was first introduced during the Musharraf era. The ugly confrontation between the centre and Sindh government threatens to affect governance, as the Sindh chief minister has stopped transferred officials from leaving the province, reflecting the cold relations between the provincial and federal administrations.

There can be little argument with the fact that the LG system the PPP introduced after doing away with the Musharraf model has failed to respond to the needs of Karachi and the rest of urban Sindh. Even Hyderabad, Larkana and Sukkur are in a shambolic state. The major reason for this is that the provincial government

has taken over key municipal functions — water, waste management, etc — that should be the domain of elected city officials. The Musharraf-era LG system was far from perfect, but at least people could approach their local councillors with relative ease to get civic issues resolved. Now citizens must run after bureaucrats and administrators to beg for the streets to be swept, or garbage to be lifted. Instead of bulldozing any new LG legislation, the PPP must listen to the opposition and devise a new local bodies law that truly devolves power to the third tier, with the provincial government playing a supervisory role.

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Funding for polls

THE PTI government's autocratic mentality is again on full display, even as it feigns adherence to the law. Following a federal cabinet meeting on Tuesday, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said "the government could not fund any election held without [the use of] electronic voting machines as after the recent amendment, the law [only] recognised polls involving the use of EVMs". A committee, he added, had been set up to deliberate further on this point while the law ministry would also give its opinion. The government may only be testing the waters, but it would be well advised not to travel further down this undemocratic path.

Indeed, it is difficult to see the statement as anything other than an attempt to browbeat the Election Commission of Pakistan, even if the option of withholding funds from it is couched as something still under discussion. The ECP is a constitutionally empowered, independent and permanent body responsible for organising and conducting elections in the country: does the government's stance not constitute an implied threat to its autonomy? And how does it serve the law when the centre ponders an action that would prevent the ECP from fulfilling its mandate? Moreover, the amendment to the Elections Act 2017 that the minister referred to in his press briefing did not exclude paper ballots, or say that only the results of EVMs would be considered legitimate. The ECP, which is functioning with two members less because the government and the opposition cannot agree on whom to appoint, has rejected what it terms "pressure and intimidation" from the centre in expediting the process of purchasing the machines.

The recent saga of poll reforms is a sad reflection on the state of our democracy, when the party in power considers it kosher to bulldoze through amendments to the election law that the opposition is vociferously objecting to. It goes without saying that parties to an election must to a reasonable degree have the expectation of a level playing field if the results are to be accepted as being genuine. Certainly, Pakistan's chequered electoral history has many a time seen the pitch queered by unelected forces in cahoots with unscrupulous politicians. However, parliament was moving in the right direction. The Elections Act 2017 was the outcome of a bipartisan consensus that took nearly three years and over 100 committee meetings to arrive at. Compare that with the acrimony leading up to the joint session of parliament and the pandemonium that surrounded the passage of the amendment bill. Even more surprising was that this took place just two months after a parliamentary panel was set up to discuss the contentious poll reforms pertaining to EVMs and I-voting for overseas Pakistanis. It proved a brief, stillborn attempt at consensus. One can safely say that debate and discussion on election laws has suffered a serious setback.

Soaring prices

PRICES are surging. And they are increasing at a much faster pace than anticipated, burdening millions of low-middle-income households and raising risks to the economy. PBS data for November shows that the pace of headline CPI inflation has spiked to 11.5pc, the fastest since February 2020. It breaches SBP's projection of 7pc-9pc for the current fiscal, and the target of 5pc-7pc for the next 18-24 months by a long shot. The month-over-month jump of 3pc in prices from October is also more than a 13-year high. Food has become more expensive and core inflation is rising faster. The growth of 18.1pc in the weekly SPI inflation and 27pc in WPI inflation indicate that the pace of increase in domestic prices is unlikely to decrease soon. With CPI averaging 9.3pc in the first five months of the present fiscal year to November, analysts estimate headline inflation to average 11pc-12pc in the remaining seven months. Pakistan's inflation rate is driven primarily by demand factors, higher international commodity prices, exchange rate depreciation and inflationary expectations going forward, according to the finance ministry.

While the current government cannot be blamed for global inflation that has seen commodity prices skyrocket in recent months over supply disruptions and

increased post-Covid demand, it must be faulted for having a pro-cyclical spending plan despite running a large budget deficit and high debt. It couldn't put the brakes on the Covid pandemic or world commodity prices but it could have controlled its politically motivated, inflationary fiscal policies that have made millions of families poorer than before as they face increased costs of food, energy, health, education, housing etc. The SBP too cannot be absolved of its failure to forecast correctly and take appropriate action to stabilise prices. Until July, it found 'price pressures largely supply-driven and transient'. Before that, price pressures were "concentrated among a relatively confined set of items". It wasn't until September when it woke up to risks to inflation and balance of payments originating from expansionary fiscal and monetary policies. It took another couple of months and pressure from the IMF to acknowledge the role of 'money supply growth to above trend levels' in the emergence of demand-side pressures on inflation, and a need to normalise monetary conditions. People may have been spared at least some of the pain caused by the high cost of living had the government and bank realised the error of their actions a little earlier.

Published in Dawn, December 2nd, 2021

Ali Wazir's bail

IT has been a long time coming, but MNA and Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement leader Ali Wazir has finally been granted bail by the Supreme Court after he was detained in 2020. The apex court observed that Mr Wazir could not be kept in jail as the other suspect in the case was granted bail — a correct and just decision which was long awaited by the MNA who is accused of making incendiary remarks against state institutions.

During the hearing, the bench made some interesting observations. One, that the state has on other occasions released individuals after negotiations. The second was a question raised by a judge who wondered whether the issues raised by Mr Wazir should not have been discussed in parliament. One of the judges went so far as to observe that the treatment meted out to Mr Wazir differed starkly to another co-accused in the case, and dubbed it a case of 'good Taliban and bad Taliban' — a euphemism that speaks volumes for the state's duplicitous approach towards those criticising it.

That an elected MNA has been repeatedly denied bail and prevented from attending parliament for being critical of the state reflects sadly on the fragile state of our democracy and the state's intolerance towards certain groups. It is only natural to draw parallels between how the government has handled the TLP case and Mr Wazir's situation; the extremist group has been coddled while the MNA has languished in custody.

Unlike the TLP, Mr Wazir did not break public infrastructure, block roads or raise slogans that could be considered hate speech. He is one of the leaders of a movement demanding justified rights. To try an elected politician in an ATC, one who himself has lost family members to terrorism, is a travesty. Unfortunately for Mr Wazir, this is just one of the cases against him; he still awaits bail in others. The government must rethink its policy of isolating Pakhtun rights activists and address their grievances, instead of punishing them.

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Crime against humanity

IT is a form of collective punishment that, one would imagine, only the most brutal autocracies inflict on their citizens. And yet, in Pakistan, where a democratic system ostensibly exists, thousands of families are made to suffer the anguish that is the fate of those whose loved ones have been forcibly disappeared.

The petition brought by one such family, that of journalist Mudassar Naaru who reportedly went missing on Aug 19, 2018, is being heard at the Islamabad High Court. On Wednesday, Chief Justice Athar Minallah conveyed a clear message that in such cases the buck stops with the federal government, specifically the prime minister and members of the cabinet. Terming enforced disappearances a crime against humanity, he described the state's response towards recovering missing persons as "pathetic", observing it would be very different if a public office holder's loved one were to disappear.

In fact, the judge proposed that the prime minister and his cabinet, being responsible for the citizens' security and having authority over the intelligence and investigation agencies, should pay compensation to the legal heirs of the

missing. He also directed the human rights minister to arrange a meeting of Mr Naaru's family with the PM and his ministers.

One can perhaps see in this an attempt by the judiciary to force the government to confront the pain of the families of the missing so that their conscience will be pricked into doing more than mouthing platitudes when the issue is raised in court. And if that fails, for each case to exact a financial cost from those at the helm. As Justice Minallah observed: "This is not a matter of summaries or reports".

Indeed, this is a human tragedy on a vast scale. For too long, however, such cases have been treated with a cursoriness that smacks of a total disconnect between the state and its citizens. The government has yet to fulfil its long-standing pledge to criminalise enforced disappearances, even though the practice violates constitutionally protected rights to security of person and due process. Meanwhile, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has to date not investigated, let alone prosecuted, anyone for involvement in this heinous crime. It has thus been an abject failure in this aspect of its mandate, even though it has done well to document cases of enforced disappearances and traced the whereabouts of a number of victims.

However, until they are held accountable, the perpetrators of this crime are unlikely to give up these tactics. According to its latest progress report, the commission received 8,279 cases of alleged enforced disappearances from across the country between March 2011 and November 2021. It 'disposed of' 6,047 cases, including 123 last month. Behind each of those numbers, however, there probably lies a story of unspeakable suffering that will never see the light of day.

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Revised valuations

THE revised property valuations notified by the FBR for 40 cities for the purpose of collecting federal taxes — withholding tax on transactions and capital gains tax on profits — must fetch the government substantial additional revenues. The new valuation rates have significantly narrowed the gap between the market prices of immovable property and the rates at which the FBR used to tax such

transactions until now. In addition to enhancing the property valuation rates, the board has also extended the scope of its taxes on property from 21 to 40 cities. Even where properties were already being taxed on the basis of the 2016 valuation tables, the FBR has extended the coverage of withholding tax and capital gains to areas that remained outside their scope so far. The fresh valuations cover all types of immovable properties: commercial, residential, apartments etc.

The need for revising the valuation tables had long been felt due to a massive spike in property prices in recent years, particularly after a tax amnesty was announced by the PTI government last year to jump-start a sluggish economy. The IMF had also been pursuing the FBR to revise the valuation rates in accordance with the new market prices. The move could be an important step towards the documentation of our real estate and construction industry and may discourage the parking of illicit money in property, besides improving revenues. That said, it remains a reality that federal taxes on property transactions, imposed with the express aim of broadening the income tax net, are but an encroachment on the tax jurisdictions of provincial governments — and by extension of local governments. This is in spite of the fact that the federal government is technically taxing the income of the buyers and sellers and not the property involved. Global experience shows that property taxes are perhaps the most important levy that can improve the quality of public services and bridge the service delivery gap in the urban areas. In Pakistan, the yield from taxes on urban immovable property has historically remained negligible because provincial governments always balk at taxing property, just like agriculture income, for fear of a popular political backlash, or under pressure from large investors and developers. With the quality and coverage of public service delivery consistently deteriorating in large urban centres such as Karachi, it is time the provinces started implementing reforms to increase revenues from taxes on property and wrest back the ground lost to the FBR.

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PWD await rights

ON the International Day of Disabled Persons, it is important to take stock of how far Pakistan has come in ensuring that those with disabilities live a life of

freedom, equality and dignity. Unfortunately, though Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities over a decade ago and more recently saw the passage of the Rights of Persons with Disability in 2020, there are miles to go before these rights can be enforced. To begin with, the general mentality towards PWD shows ignorance and callousness. For instance, at a news conference in Lahore in 2020, a minister made insensitive remarks about disabled people, saying that children with disabilities were a punishment from God for wrongdoers and hoarders — a most irresponsible statement from a public figure, but one that reflects the mindset of Pakistani society at large. The purpose of the convention is to uphold, protect and ensure the complete and equal enjoyment of all human rights and freedoms by all PWD, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. The disability rights law, too, provides a comprehensive legal framework to protect and promote the rights of PWD in Pakistan. These legal instruments ensure that thousands of PWD in the country who are excluded from public life are able to challenge incidents in which they are discriminated against.

Though legislation is important, there is a lot of work to be done by both the centre and the provincial governments to give access to PWD in terms of infrastructure as well as employment opportunities. In addition, a narrative is needed that battles toxic and discriminatory mindsets. Data collection on PWD, too, is abysmal. According to the 1998 census, PWD comprised just over 2pc of the population — a figure which absurdly fell in the 2017 census by around 80pc to a mere 0.48pc. Authorities must do more to collect accurate data on PWD, for only then can resources be allocated to ensure they enjoy their constitutionally enshrined freedoms.

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UK spymaster speaks

A RECENT speech by the chief of MI6 — the UK’s external intelligence agency — provided a key insight into the thinking of one of the Western bloc’s principal members about global affairs. Suffice to say, Richard Moore minced no words when he listed China, Russia, Iran and global terrorism as the UK’s “big four” security concerns. The British spymaster said China was his “single greatest priority” while terming the threat from Russia as “acute”. He added that Iran was

playing a ‘destabilising’ role. Perhaps during the Cold War era such language would have been commonplace. But three decades after the communist and capitalist blocs ended their dangerous confrontation, with the defeat of the former, clearly a new competition in global hard power politics is underway, with the Western states unwilling to see other centres of power challenge their economic and military dominance. The CIA chief has made similar comments about China, terming the People’s Republic as “adversarial” and committing more resources to confront it.

As in the past this confrontation is being described in moral terms, when the ‘free’ West took on the ‘evil’ monster of communism. The fact is that then as well as now, the true competition between states and blocs is over power, influence and control of the global economy. China, Russia and Iran all pursue policies in their national interest, as do the US, UK and other members of the Western bloc. Of course, these interests don’t always align, which gives rise to confrontation in global politics. The key is managing these conflicts through a combination of balance of power and accommodation of the other side’s views. Instead of pursuing a confrontational course, the Western states must realise that China, Russia and other states will not simply ‘submit’ to their wishes. Beijing, Moscow, Tehran and their allies should also be willing to accommodate the West’s concerns. If all pursue a zero-sum game, more global conflict and instability will be the likely outcome — one that can and should be avoided.

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Stock market carnage

PAKISTAN’S stock market has been on a downward ride for the last several months as a result of deteriorating macroeconomic data and economic uncertainty.

Share prices, however, started to sink deeper following the State Bank’s decision to unexpectedly boost its key policy rate by a hefty 150bps to 8.75pc at the Nov 19 Monetary Policy Committee meeting. But few expected the bloodbath witnessed in the market on Thursday with the benchmark KSE-100 index suffering heavy losses of more than 2,100 points — signifying an erosion of 4.7pc of its value — in a single day since March last year when Covid-related

curbs were first imposed. The stocks lost almost the same amount of their value in three days following the recent monetary policy announcement.

The main culprit for the bloodbath appears to be the widespread apprehension over new PBS data showing that the trade deficit worsened last month; this led to fears of a sharper increase in interest rates in the immediate term and greater pressure on the deteriorating current account and weakening home currency. That the yields on treasury bills have already jumped to nearly 12pc over the last few days and the rupee has declined to 176.77 to a dollar in the interbank market confirms that the investors' anxiety isn't misplaced.

The markets follow not only economic indicators but also popular perceptions about the economy. The decline in share prices has much to do with the worsening economic data but the current situation cannot be fully explained without taking into account what investors think about the future of the country's economy in the near to medium term. The failure of the PTI government to contain runaway inflation coupled with the consistent rupee erosion because of the burgeoning current account deficit has not only battered investors' confidence but also entrenched expectations of higher headline numbers over the next several months.

Average headline inflation is anticipated to rise from 9.3pc in the first five months of the present fiscal to nearly 12pc for the remaining months, with more inflationary measures in the proposed 'mini budget' to meet IMF demands. Likewise, the current account deficit is predicted to balloon to nearly 5pc of GDP this year, breaching State Bank estimates of 2pc-3pc.

The delays in the resumption of IMF funding in spite of a staff-level agreement with the lender, and stringent Saudi conditions linked to the kingdom's loan, have also reinforced worries over the government's ability to raise foreign funds for reducing pressures on the external sector. Expecting the bears to return to their cages in such uncertain times when the government is putting growth into lower gear is foolish. Share prices will likely continue to plunge until inflation is controlled, normalcy returns to the foreign exchange market and the cost of money comes down to make stocks a more attractive option than sovereign debt.

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Omicron threat

THE NCOC has suggested installing more oxygen plants in various parts of the country as the new Covid-19 variant, Omicron, spread to five continents this week. The decision to increase the number of oxygen plants and provide support to far-flung areas is timely, for as Planning Minister Asad Umar said last week, it is inevitable that the new variant will reach Pakistan. The forum also noted that though 50m people have been inoculated, vaccination rates need to increase so that the maximum number of individuals are jabbed against the virus. Though the latest officially recorded Covid-19 cases over a 24-hour period remained low at under 400, vigilance is key and coordination between the federal and provincial administrations can once again avert an all-out disaster. It is still early days for the new variant, and scientists are working at breakneck speed to better understand how lethal, transmissible and dangerous Omicron is. The most frightening prospect about the new strain is that it may evade vaccines and still infect those who have immunity from previous variants. If this is indeed the case, it will be a devastating blow to the global vaccination programme. The rapid increase of cases in South Africa suggests that the new variant may be able to beat the vaccine, given that about a fourth of the population is vaccinated and many have herd immunity. Some scientists suggest that even in a population that is highly vaccinated, the lack of other control measures will allow Omicron to spread.

Pakistan cannot afford to take Omicron lightly. With less than a quarter of the entire population fully inoculated, there are swathes of vulnerable, elderly unvaccinated citizens that could fall seriously ill and even be hospitalised. As scientists race to understand Omicron's transmissibility, authorities have to err on the side of caution as they plan for what will happen if a virus that spreads faster than the Delta variant comes to Pakistan — even if it is not more lethal. It will still mean more infections and therefore a higher percentage of hospital admissions — something we have seen when cases spiked. As vaccinations and the number of oxygen tanks are ramped up, precautions such as mask wearing and distancing must be adhered to, especially indoors where large numbers of people are expected to gather during the festive season. Pakistan has successfully averted a Covid-19 catastrophe in the past, and with precautions and widespread testing, can do it again.

Reality of AIDS

AS World AIDS Day was marked on Dec 1, it came as a sobering reminder of how newer, major health hazards — the Covid-19 pandemic foremost amongst them — have forced onto the back-burner another frighteningly endemic issue. UNAIDS estimates that Pakistan has the fastest-growing number of AIDS cases in Asia, while the National AIDS Control Programme provides the following figures: 0.24m people estimated to be HIV sufferers; 46,912 people living with HIV that were (until June) registered in 50 anti-retroviral treatment centres; 26,096 people receiving anti-retroviral therapy; and, 7,264 people who inject drugs and are on ARV therapy.

AIDS/HIV in particular presents a tricky battle because of the associated stigma. When the disease was initially identified many decades ago, it was generally believed that unsafe sexual practices were the prime cause. That has left an indelible stain on a virus that is transmitted through several other means, including mother-to-foetus, unscreened blood transfusions and, in Pakistan, via improperly sterilised surgical equipment and the reuse of infected needles. Again, this last carries with it the stigma of injecting-drug-users. But there are examples beyond that as was seen in Larkana when, during a 2019 major outbreak, the spread of HIV was detected amongst hundreds of very young children of a local community. Upon investigation, it was found that almost all the children had received injections at the hands of unscrupulous ‘GPs’ — in other words, the reuse of contaminated syringes appeared to be the main cause. A study published at the time in the Lancet medical journal revealed that in the preceding two decades, “up to eight outbreaks of HIV [had] been reported in Pakistan, with more than half in a single district — Larkana”. In addition to the havoc wreaked by ‘quacks’ or unqualified ‘doctors’, the reuse of razors was blamed. With so many other burdens on the quality of lives of its citizens and on its healthcare system, the country must bring the issue back to the forefront immediately.

Published in Dawn, December 5th, 2021

Horror in Sialkot

ONCE again, we are reminded how far this nation has descended into the abyss. This time the sickeningly familiar ritual of savage violence was enacted in Sialkot where Priyantha Kumara Diyawadana, a Sri Lankan national, was beaten to death on Friday over blasphemy allegations at the factory where he worked as a manager.

The mob then dragged his mangled body out on the road and set it on fire, where individuals on the scene — as if to underscore their utter lack of humanity — took selfies with the burning corpse. Where were law-enforcement personnel who should have protected Mr Diyawadana? How was the situation allowed to escalate to the point it did? What followed the grisly murder was predictable: condemnation by the political leadership, with the government vowing to punish the perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law. The army chief too, almost certainly because the victim was a foreign national, denounced “such extrajudicial vigilantism”.

For the same reason perhaps, religious bodies have also shown alacrity where they usually maintain a deafening silence and issued statements to condemn the lynching. Most ironic among them is the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan, the ultra-right group that proudly claims as its inspiration a man who committed murder in the name of blasphemy.

It is indeed a day of shame for Pakistan. Having repeatedly vented our bloodlust on our own, this time the extremists amongst us turned on an individual who was a guest in this country. Not surprisingly, however, the official denunciations only touch upon the here and now, the tip of the iceberg. The bitter truth is, on the last day of his life, Mr Diyawadana came face to face with the consequences of the Pakistani state’s decades-long policy of appeasing religious extremists. Even though the violent ultra-right outfits once used for strategic objectives began to be reined in a few years ago, other sectarian groups that were radicalised as part of the same process have since gained new ground. As extremism seeped into the body politic, blasphemy increasingly became weaponised, an expedient tool that could be wielded in a variety of situations: to take over the land of minority communities, to settle personal disputes — even to engineer protests to destabilise a sitting government in 2017.

All it takes now is an allegation of blasphemy and an individual or two to incite a mob to commit murder. Who can forget young Mashal Khan, lynched by his fellow students in 2017, or Shama and Shahzad Masih, burned alive in a brick kiln in 2014? These are but three victims in a long chronology of horror. Each act of lynching, each desecration of a place of worship, each life destroyed as a result is an indictment of a state that has long made cynical use of religion as part of its playbook. We must reverse course before the flames of intolerance devour us as a nation.

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Iran deadlock

EFFORTS to revive the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear deal in the Austrian capital of Vienna appear to be deadlocked, and unless all parties concerned decide to amend their respective stance, chances of success look slim. The Iranian side wants significant changes to the agreement and a lifting of all sanctions. The UK, France and Germany, also representing the US, have adopted a more rigid position, asking Tehran to return to the original deal. However, it should be remembered that the latter deal was scuttled when Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from it in 2018, reimposing crushing sanctions on Iran even though neutral observers were of the view that Tehran was in compliance with requirements. The crisis then has been clearly precipitated by that rash move, and the Western side has shown no great inclination to rebuild trust with Tehran, instead addressing the latter in patronising terms. There may well be a conservative president in the saddle in Tehran adopting a tougher negotiating position, but the Iranian establishment as a whole is much more suspicious of the West after the country accrued zero benefits from the nuclear deal. Moreover, Israel's irresponsible statements urging the West to shun negotiations with Iran are only vitiating the atmosphere and greatly hurting chances of peace.

As talks resume next week, the West will need to bring something more to the table, while Iran may want to rationally consider the offer. Reports from within the meeting room indicate that the atmosphere is tense, with Iran calling upon the Europeans not to 'threaten' them, while the Chinese delegation has accused the Western side of 'hypocrisy'. At another level, the nuclear talks reflect the greater geopolitical tensions in the world, as the Western bloc faces off against a loose

alliance of Russia, China, Iran and others. Efforts to revive the deal should continue, and through it, normalise ties between Iran and the West. But it will need immense effort to dispel the distrust of the past four decades. Both sides ought to show vision and statesmanship, and approach each other with due respect. Indeed, if the Europeans and Americans use threatening language, Iran will further harden its stance, ensuring that the deal and any chances of normalisation are buried for the foreseeable future. Moreover, rogue elements that are calling for abandoning the negotiations must be ignored by the world community and not allowed to sabotage peace efforts.

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Winter sports potential

FOR a country blessed with three of the world's most famous mountain ranges, Pakistan has produced precious few Winter Olympians. Only three, namely Mohammad Abbas, Mohammad Karim and Syed Human, have represented Pakistan at the pinnacle of winter sports. For next year's Winter Olympics in Beijing, Pakistan has an allocation of two spots in alpine skiing. That though isn't the only sport locals in Pakistan's northern region take part in. Other sports, including snowboarding, downhill skiing and ice hockey, are also played with great fervour. And as Gilgit-Baltistan holds its first formal snow sports festival from this month, it is hoped that new talent will emerge. That though isn't the hard part. Very little has been done to hone that talent so that supreme athletes can emerge and compete against the very best internationally. Then, there is the problem of distance. All three of Pakistan's Winter Olympians come from the Naltar valley in GB, which was developed as our first ski resort in 1958. Malam Jabba, which was proposed as a ski resort in 1962, was beset with security issues at the turn of the last decade but is now slowly picking up. Madaklasht in Chitral is the country's most recently discovered winter sports venue. And, as in most of the northern areas, skiing has been part of its activities for almost a century, with locals having crafted wooden skis of their own.

The remoteness of Madaklasht, though, means that unlike Naltar or Malam Jabba, it lacks infrastructure. Most athletes only have equipment donated by foreign skiers, who visit those areas now and then. While sports festivals do contribute to athlete growth, giving locals a chance to test their mettle against

international athletes, it is essential for the government to develop infrastructure and get modern equipment for talented individuals who like other sportspeople will require the highest level of training off-season. That means heavy investment but it is probably the only way Pakistan can realise the tremendous winter sports potential it possesses.

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Who should vote?

PRESIDENT Arif Alvi has signed into law the bills passed by the joint session of parliament, including the ones pertaining to electoral reforms. While there is a lot of concern and controversy over the use of electronic voting machines, greater transparency is also needed on the mechanics of voting rights for overseas Pakistanis.

The PTI government has pushed hard for these two reforms and cabinet ministers are now saying that enfranchising overseas Pakistanis will give the PTI a clear electoral advantage on at least a few dozen parliamentary seats. But who among the overseas Pakistanis will actually get to vote in the next general elections remains unclear.

This must change. Overseas Pakistanis can generally be divided into three categories.

The first are the Pakistan Origin Card holders who have surrendered their Pakistani nationality and use the card to facilitate their travel. The second are the holders of the National Identity Card for Overseas Pakistan, many of whom are dual nationals. The third are those Pakistanis who are working abroad but retain their green passports.

Lumping them all together for enfranchisement makes little sense.

Those in the first category have made a deliberate choice to renounce their Pakistani nationality and become loyal citizens of another state. This provides them voting rights in their new country of citizenship, and they also pay taxes accordingly. Making a case for them to have voting rights in Pakistan — whose citizenship they have relinquished by choice — is a difficult one. The second category of dual nationals getting voting rights is also problematic. They have

taken an oath of allegiance to another country and therefore cannot claim eligibility for voting in their country of birth. In the past, Prime Minister Imran Khan has himself opposed the idea of giving dual nationals a right to vote.

It is the third category of people — Pakistani citizens working abroad — that have the strongest claim for enfranchisement. They have retained their citizenship, pay taxes here and do not have divided loyalties. Therefore, they have the full right to be given the right to vote in the next general elections. However, these details need to be chalked out at the earliest so preparations can be made accordingly. The complications within this decision — and there may be numerous — should be ironed out through a debate in a timely manner in order to inject transparency into the issue and not allow any confusion to fester.

The complications may require a practical and solution-oriented approach. For instance, many countries that host Pakistani workers do not follow an electoral system of governance and may have reservations if Pakistan asked for preparations for voting. Similarly, logistical issues regarding transparency in the casting of votes also require detailed deliberations. The ECP may need to push for clarity from the government and move swiftly to address these issues.

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Weak fundamentals

LAST week, Pakistan's finance chief Shaukat Tarin sought to reassure the markets and people that our economic fundamentals remained strong and the economy continued to progress on the growth path. He added that inflationary pressures crushing the low-middle-income households in recent months were mostly 'imported' and transitory. He called for patience for a few months as prices would start to taper soon. Mr Tarin's hopes are based on the expected reversal in the international commodity cycle, which the government has consistently blamed for soaring domestic prices, the ballooning current account deficit and increasing import costs. But it's not so simple.

Indeed, the spiral in global commodity markets, especially energy and food inflation, has fed domestic prices significantly. But it is incorrect to entirely blame global inflation for the spike in these prices which had been rising in Pakistan even before international energy and food inflation kicked in on the back of

increasing world demand/ supply disruptions during Covid. The government blamed the economic policies of its predecessor while the central bank pointed fingers at supply chain disruptions and administered energy tariffs. Likewise, the current account deficit had remained under control in the last couple of years first because of import suppression under IMF-mandated policies and later due to a steep drop in global energy prices once countries shut down their economies and closed their borders to contain the spread of Covid. The recent decrease in oil prices is again driven by fears of a new virus variant. How long this tapering in international prices will last and how the commodity markets will behave in future is anybody's guess. The fact is that the government's blind pursuit of growth for improving its electoral chances in 2023 through expansive fiscal policies and increased money supply in the market are the most dominant factors that are currently driving up domestic prices and expanding the current account gap. Even the growth in export in the last five months owes more to higher global prices than an increase in textiles and other items we have sold to the rest of the world. If the fundamentals of the economy were as strong as Mr Tarin wants us to believe, the economy would not have experienced such inflationary and external shocks. Nor would the government have to accept the harsh conditions of the IMF and Saudi Arabia to get the dollars needed to shore up the country's depleting forex reserves.

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Losing fiscal discipline

ONE of the several changes proposed in the Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Limitation Act of 2005, seeking major relaxations in conditions under which the government may “depart from the principles of sound fiscal and debt management owing to unforeseen demands on its finances”, is seemingly in conflict with the very intent of the law. The 2017 version of the Act lets the government temporarily quit the path of fiscal discipline and debt reduction in case of unexpected needs arising out of national security reasons (terrorism, war, riots etc), projects of national importance and natural calamity (floods, earthquake, drought etc), or as determined by the National Assembly. The suggested changes, however, will give the government a free hand to move away from the path of fiscal and debt reduction and accumulate more debt to meet its needs if and when it deems it necessary.

The amendment to the Act has been proposed at a time when Pakistan's total debt and liabilities have spiked by a whopping 70pc to Rs50.5tr. As the State Bank data for September shows, the public debt alone has grown to Rs41.5tr or 77pc of the nation's GDP, far exceeding the limit of 60pc imposed by the law. The government has added Rs16.5tr to public debt so far as it has been borrowing heavily to meet its expenditure. The previous PML-N government had also violated the law as the debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 72.5pc at the end of its term in 2018.

Indeed, the other proposed amendments to the law, for instance, limiting the total stock of government guarantees at 10pc of GDP to fix the total debt and liabilities limit at 70pc of GDP, strengthening of and institutionalising debt management functions in a single office, publication of the Medium-Term National Macro-Fiscal Framework etc are some steps in the right direction. But using these amendments to thin out the debt-to-GDP limit is worrisome. The legislation was originally meant to reduce the revenue deficit to nil by June 2008 and thereafter maintain a revenue surplus, place the cap on total public debt, and slash the latter by not less than 2.5pc of GDP each year till 2013. Sadly, none of these objectives have been achieved because of the elite's fiscal profligacy at the expense of the well-being of ordinary Pakistani citizens. The prime minister himself has termed the growing debt as a 'national security issue'. If nothing else this should be reason enough for the government to implement the law, pursue policies for boosting tax revenues, cut unessential expenditures and slash debt. The growing burden of loans is a major reason for problems such as inflation, poverty, low literacy levels, poor healthcare and a widening current account deficit. The increasing costs of debt payments and expanding fiscal deficit cut into the state's ability to invest in human capital at a great cost to its citizens.

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Taliban brutality

LAST WEEK, the US, the Western countries and other allies joined hands to condemn the Afghan Taliban for the alleged "summary killings" of dozens of former security forces personnel and enforced disappearances. The group of nations voiced their deep concern over a Human Rights Watch report that has documented instances of serious human rights abuses by the new rulers of

Afghanistan. The report cites 47 instances of former members of the Afghan National Security Forces, other military personnel, policemen and intelligence agents “who had surrendered to or were apprehended by Taliban forces” being either summarily executed or arbitrarily arrested or ‘disappeared’. The report contradicts the Taliban’s earlier announcement of amnesty for all former government civilian and military officials and their assurances of holding violators amongst their ranks accountable.

Of course, the Taliban’s interior ministry has rejected the report, calling for evidence, while at the same time, acknowledging “some cases” of murder of former officials due to personal rivalries and enmities. The acting defence minister, Mullah Muhammad Yaqub, acknowledged “isolated reports” of unauthorised execution. In September, the Taliban formed a commission to purge from its ranks anyone involved in violating orders, followed by a statement saying they had removed 755 members found to have committed such acts and that a military tribunal had been formed to try those accused of “murder, torture and illegal detention”, Action speaks louder than words, and their words must match their actions. As the HRW report says, the Taliban must investigate reported instances of such abuses and prosecute and punish those responsible through independent and credible courts. They must also provide full information to those whose family members have gone missing through enforced disappearances and provide full access to the UN, the media and human rights organisations to investigate and report on human rights in Afghanistan. It is equally important for the world at large, more so for the US and Western groups, to continue to engage the Taliban to ensure that internationally recognised human rights are fully protected. Sitting on the fringes and condemning and voicing concerns is simply not enough. Any direct assistance to the Taliban must not come without them fully complying with their international obligations and showing respect for the rule of law and human rights. HRW has rightly called upon the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan to “maintain and fully implement its mandate to investigate human rights violations and abuses”. The mission must act on its advice.

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Dangerous justification

AT a time when millions worldwide are consumed with anger and despair over the barbaric lynching of a Sri Lankan national in Sialkot, Federal Minister Pervez Khattak has uttered words which can only be interpreted as a pathetic justification for murder.

Speaking to reporters, the defence minister, when asked to comment on the ghastly crime, said the killing was simply a result of young people being high on emotion and passion. Indignant at the idea that the government is somehow responsible for creating an environment where such a horrific crime can happen, Mr Khattak downplayed the incident in words that can only be described as ignorant and dangerous.

Not only was he adamant that people refrain from characterising the Sialkot lynching as an incident that shows how society is headed towards destruction, he also appeared to believe that young people, when high on emotion, can kill in the name of religion. He went so far as to indicate that he himself in his youth was emotional and ready to do anything, and that fights and even murders are a result of such a mentality.

Such a statement from a federal minister should come as a shock, but unfortunately, we are accustomed to our public officials being in denial about the realities of extremism and violence in the country. Mr Khattak's remarks are deeply problematic. They create an impression that such killings are somehow a 'normal' part of growing up in a country where religion can be used to justify crime.

Instead of asking the journalist who was quizzing him to change this mob mentality, it would have served the minister better to have recalled that, in fact, he is a member of government who actually has the power to influence large sections of the population. It may be an alien idea to Mr Khattak, but he should have roundly condemned this incident and reflected on why our society has become so brutalised, instead of ascribing this heinous crime to youthful passions.

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PDM's lack of strategy

THE opposition alliance PDM has announced a 'long march' on Islamabad on March 23 in a bid to de-seat the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan. The magnitude of this announcement appears to have taken no one's breath away. With no agreement or consensus on the key issues of resignations from the assemblies, and a decision to hold benign events like seminars and conferences, the message that the PDM seems to be conveying is that it really does not have many options left in its political armoury.

The government can rest easy. But then, ever since the PDM's whimpering end to its first campaign earlier in the year, it has hardly given any reason for the government to have sleepless nights.

The PDM has struggled with clarity ever since the PPP walked out of it in a huff. The original dilemma that the alliance faced in the early phases continues to haunt it. Resigning from the assemblies is apparently the most potent weapon it wields but that can only work — and that too is an assumption — if the combined opposition were to tender the resignations together.

The PPP was clear even last year that this would be a bad move. It turns out now that the PML-N has also moved closer to the PPP's position and its various senior leaders have acknowledged so by arguing that they want to retain the option of a no-confidence vote against the prime minister instead of leaving parliament open for the government. The scheduled march on the capital more than three months from now is therefore little more than inaction dressed up to look like a strategy. In fact, increasingly it looks like the alliance would rather wait and see if the situation worsens both politically and economically before the PDM brings itself to commit to something more than vague threats. Three months is a long time in politics and no one knows this better than the politicians who drive the alliance. It may be safe to assume that by opting for such non-options, they are acknowledging that they are running on empty.

The opposition parties on their own, however, believe they can be more effective than the alliance. The PPP and PML-N are both pursuing various options to play the numbers game in parliament and their energies are focused on timelines that are shorter than the one set by the PDM. This leaves JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman in a difficult spot. With insignificant numbers in parliament, the only

weight he carries is on the streets. The street option, however, is a risky one because it is very hard to translate it into a clear pathway to the government's ouster. The PDM for now, therefore, appears to be more of a pressure group than a real threat to the government, and the opposition realises it too.

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Undertrials' escape

IN any country with respect for the law an incident such as Monday's escape of undertrials from a lock-up in Lahore would have been taken seriously by the authorities. The police command would have ordered an immediate, detailed review of all aspects related to the custody and transportation of undertrials to and from the courts to plug some of the gaps in the justice system. But in Pakistan, those at the helm prefer to look for easier solutions to pacify the public, and find scapegoats among their subordinates. Little wonder then that the Punjab police chief chose to suspend a few policemen — without an inquiry — when 12 out of 166 prisoners facing trial on charges of various felonies escaped from the Model Town judicial lock-up. That the 'armed' police escorts, who had brought them from the two Lahore jails to the courts, looked away or ran helter-skelter outside the Model Town judicial complex as the prisoners attacked them in their attempt to get away speaks volumes for their poor training and capacity to deal with such circumstances. It also shows their unwillingness to risk their physical safety with no one around to lead them.

This is not the first incident of its kind. In the past, we have witnessed several such events from Attock to Karachi. Such happenings also reflect our dysfunctional criminal justice system where no one from the police to the prosecution to the courts to the prison administration is doing their job properly. The bulk of financial resources allocated by the provinces every year towards improving matters is mostly used for 'maintaining' law and order. Police, prisons and the lower judiciary get next to nothing. Consequently, we have overcrowded jails, untrained policemen and a judiciary struggling to perform its functions. The Lahore incident is indicative of all that is wrong with the criminal justice infrastructure in the country: A large number of prisoners brought in packed prison buses are locked up in a small space to wait for hours without food or water for their turn to be heard by the judges who don't have more than a few

minutes for each case. Some may have to undergo this process for several years. More importantly, this incident shows how the state's surrender to violent mobs and extremist groups in recent years has affected the morale of policemen who seem to have totally lost their motivation to prevent mayhem and lawlessness.

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Suu Kyi's sentence

THE military junta that holds sway in Myanmar clearly wants to ensure that Aung San Suu Kyi does not participate in the country's politics. The pro-democracy leader and former state counsellor faces nearly a dozen cases the military instituted against her after removing the hybrid regime led by her from power in February. On Monday, she was sentenced in two of these cases for incitement and violating Covid restrictions. Ms Suu Kyi has denied the charges while the UN's human rights chief has denounced the "sham trial" against her. Aung San Suu Kyi had led an uneasy administration in partnership with the military for years, with the latter always retaining the upper hand in matters of state. However, the generals felt that a landslide victory for her party in elections last year would only solidify her position, thus they chose to strike earlier this year, denouncing the polls as rigged and removing the semi-elected government. Most observers had said the elections were fair. Following the coup, thousands in Myanmar took to the streets against the junta. But the military's crackdown against the political class, and its use of brute force against protesters has ensured that the pro-democracy movement has been severely curtailed.

Ms Suu Kyi was not an ideal leader. Her silence during the 2017 anti-Rohingya violence — overseen by the generals — was deafening, especially considering her position as the state's top civilian leader, and global reputation as a human rights defender. However, the only way to ensure rights for all is sustained representative rule in which fundamental rights for all segments of society are protected. Under the junta's watch, the protection of such rights is unlikely. The international community has made attempts to call for a return to civilian rule. For example, in October, Asean — of which Myanmar is a member — did not invite the country's top general to a summit as a rebuke. More such messages need to be sent to the junta to help pave the way for a return to democracy.

A watershed moment?

THE bitter truth has been staring this nation in the face for years. Religious violence spawned by allegations of blasphemy has taken on a life of its own, destroying the fabric of society slowly but surely. And yet it is only now, with the gruesome murder of Sri Lankan national Priyantha Kumara Diyawadanage at the hands of a mob in Sialkot, that the leadership appears to have realised this.

Addressing a condolence reference for the slain man at the PM Office, Imran Khan vowed that no one will be allowed to kill another in the name of religion and perpetrators of religiously motivated violence would be strictly punished. He went on to say that such was the climate of fear that those accused of blasphemy rotted in jail with no one even willing to investigate what had actually happened. “Everyone is afraid of it. In fact, lawyers do not come forward and judges also refuse to hear the cases.” That, he added, was all the more reason to laud the actions of Malik Adnan, Mr Diyawadanage’s colleague who tried in vain to save him from the mob.

Mr Khan’s observations are correct, but we have for too long travelled down a path where elements of the state themselves rationalise religious violence, or at the very least condone it, as an appropriate response to certain ‘provocations’. To gauge how monumental any effort at reform is, one need only recall that there stands in Punjab a well-frequented shrine to the man who murdered former governor Salmaan Taseer because he believed him to be guilty of blasphemy.

Moreover, the reaction of the ruling elite and the religious lobby to Mr Diyawadanage’s lynching is questionable. Several of the clerics vociferous in their condemnation of the murder as “inhumane and un-Islamic” have been the driving force behind the blasphemy campaign across the country that has been the cause of untold misery to thousands. Some, like Junaid Hafeez — a textbook case that illustrates what happens to blasphemy accused in the criminal justice system — languish for years behind bars.

Does the pain and anguish of these Pakistanis not register with the civilian and military leadership, members of which have been complicit in using the issue of blasphemy to achieve political ends and thereby fanned the fires of hate? There must be no tolerance for religious violence, no averting of the eyes when some

communities or individuals are targeted. None of us are safe, until all of us are safe.

Judging by appearances, the lynching in Sialkot seems to be a watershed moment. Whether it proves a catalyst for real change is as yet unknown. Sadly, history tells us that this nation has a very limited capacity for self-reflection, let alone taking the difficult steps that would be needed to root out what is no less than a cancer of the soul.

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Mobile market

THE mobile device manufacturing policy of 2020 is yielding good results — so far. The establishment of around 19 plants importing semi knocked-down kits for local assembly of low-end to mid-end mobile phones by Chinese and Korean companies in the last one year or so in the country reflects the success of the policy. Indeed, the generous tax incentives offered to the assemblers on the import of SKD kits is encouraging for investors. The introduction of the Mobile Device Identification, Registration, and Blocking System by the PTA to stop the smuggling of handsets has also played an important role in supporting capital investment in this sector by creating additional demand. The swelling cost of labour and the emerging power shortages in China, as well as the latter's deteriorating trade ties with the US and the West, have convinced Chinese firms to test the waters in Pakistan in price segments of up to \$200 per unit, which form almost 80pc of the total domestic market share.

As far as the policy's benefits to the economy are concerned, the local assembly of devices has generated several thousand new jobs and is claimed by the assemblers to have reduced the nation's mobile phone import bill by 15pc-20pc at a time when rapidly growing imports are putting additional pressure on the country's balance of payments and wiping off the gains made in the last one year. For example, the trade adviser has revealed that the import of manufactured or completely built units has declined by 73pc year-over-year to \$179m in the first five months of the ongoing fiscal. This drop has helped the government save \$410m in foreign exchange. Likewise, the import of mobile phone SKD kits for local assembly has surged by 407pc to \$674m from \$133m last year, showing the growth in locally assembled units. Nevertheless, real

benefits to the economy will not come unless the assemblers start investing in localisation of mobile phone components and exporting their products. The policy requires assemblers to ensure deletion of at least 50pc of their components by July 2023 but this means nothing unless these brands are compelled through policy tweaks to locally manufacture high-tech parts. That is not all. Consumers should also be passed on at least part of the price advantage the assemblers are getting in the shape of tax breaks. We don't want another industry like the foreign carmakers making profits at the expense of the consumers.

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Workplace harassment

THE alterations proposed in the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, will go a long way in strengthening the toothless law that has been in place for a decade. For several years now, human rights bodies and activists have been raising concern about the limited applicability of the harassment law, preventing adequate penalisation of government and private organisations where women have allegedly faced harassment. In fact, earlier this year, the Supreme Court also expressed similar views in its judgement in the Nadia Naz case. Nadia Naz had filed a petition against the termination of her services in 2017 at PTV where she was hired as a camera resource person in 2007. She was sacked before her complaint filed with the federal ombudsperson's office could be resolved. The court asserted in its judgement that the existing anti-harassment law was "blinkered" in its application, which was why the complainant had failed to establish her case. The judgement further stated that the law did not address harassment in a holistic manner, and instead, focused only on its sexual aspect.

In this context, it is encouraging to see the human rights ministry working with the relevant stakeholders to amend the law. The amendments, which have been approved by the Senate human rights committee, include expanding the definitions of 'workplace' and 'employee', to bring into its ambit unconventional and informal workplaces, as well as gender-based discrimination that has so far remained outside its purview. Similarly, the legal definition of 'employee' has also been expanded to cover sportswomen, freelancers, students, artists and home-based and domestic workers. The changes proposed also recommend harsher

penalties for employers in the form of increased fines, suspension or dismissal from service in the case of a government employee and revoking of professional licences. These amendments notwithstanding, it remains to be seen how the PTI-led government, under whose tenure misogynistic attitudes have grown more pronounced, ensures the implementation of an improved anti-harassment law. Hopefully, it will demonstrate its commitment towards a safer working environment for women.

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Taking sides

A DAY after the Foreign Office said that Pakistan did not mind engaging with the US “on a range of issues” though “at an opportune time”, Prime Minister Imran Khan added clarity to the reason behind the government’s decision not to participate in Washington’s Summit for Democracy.

After referring to CPEC as a glorious opportunity at the Islamabad Conclave 2021 yesterday, the prime minister went on to say that Pakistan should not be part of any bloc as the world heads towards a new Cold War — this one primarily involving China and the US. Mr Khan was absolutely correct in sounding the alarm: diplomatic neutrality is compromised when countries get involved in bloc politics that aims to undercut ideological or economic rivals.

The lessons of being part of the anti-communist blocs Seato and Cento should not be lost on Pakistan. Perhaps there was also a realisation of the danger in taking sides when in 2015, parliament, to its credit, refused to involve the country in the Saudi-led campaign inside war-torn Yemen.

But can the Summit for Democracy — a one-off event — be described as an international bloc? Certainly, the rivalry is clear as China and Russia were left out and Taiwan, Beijing’s *bête noire*, was invited by the US. However, among the over 100 participants are also countries that have normal ties with those whom Washington deems its rivals.

Pakistan could have attended the virtual summit — perhaps even raised the prime minister’s point about guarding against divisive international blocs from that very platform to make its stance clear, putting paid to any hopes that it was inclined to favour one party over the other. In an increasingly polarised world,

open communication between states is crucial to forging a common agenda for democracy — both domestically and in interstate relations. Many countries like Pakistan know the dangers of despotic rule only too well. Spreading this awareness and enlisting global support for democratic rule and trust-building between nations can deter the authoritarian elements forever waiting in the wings.

For Pakistan, balancing its ties with Washington and Beijing will not be easy. If the current developments are anything to go by, the Sino-American confrontation may get uglier. Tensions are already intensifying as the US, together with Canada, the UK and Australia, is officially boycotting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games (although the athletes will attend) in China over the latter's alleged human rights violations. Pakistan will need to make intelligent, and at times tough, decisions in order to maintain a neutral posture. There are many factors which will constrain such attempts, among them this country's dependency on foreign funds and investment, something which is often taken advantage of in international relations. Even so, it must find the strength to resist any temptation or pressure to root for one country at the expense of another.

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Violence against women

JUST days after the ghastly lynching of a Sri Lankan national in Sialkot brought shame and despair to the country, the video of another chilling episode of mob violence surfaced from Faisalabad. Footage captured by mobile phone cameras showed four women being stripped naked, paraded and beaten by a group of men allegedly for 'stealing' from a store. Though details of this alleged theft and its immediate aftermath are yet to be fully determined, the now viral videos of the women being degraded and filmed are absolutely horrific. An attempt is being made to paint the women, whom police say are trash collectors, as thieves who somehow brought this upon themselves — a trend that is sadly all too common in our society where women are not only abused but also told they themselves are the cause of the violence they are subjected to.

Our history is littered with incidents where women not only are victims of inhuman crimes but are also blamed for the latter. Mukhtaran Mai, for example, who was gang-raped, stripped and paraded in her village, criticised Gen

Musharraf's derogatory suggestion that women got themselves raped to find a way out of the country. More recently, a woman gang-raped in front of her children was blamed by Lahore's top police officer for venturing out too late at night. Are the men in our country, those who hold office and ordinary members of the public, incapable of condemning violence against women? Do they think passing crude remarks is acceptable? In Faisalabad, these women were accused of a crime, prompting a group of men to gather around them and mete out 'justice'. They decided they would take the law into their own hands and punish them. Not only does this show an utter lack of respect for the rule of law, it also displays a toxic male mentality that objectifies women and dictates who is honourable and who is not. There is an air of lawlessness in the country that emboldens this criminal behaviour. These victims, poor scavengers, are at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and were not just publicly degraded. They will also continue to be traumatised by the fact that the entire country has seen videos of them being paraded. This barbarism must come to an end. The government's condemnation and messaging around this episode ought to be stern and unequivocal, and serve as a warning that vigilantes will be punished.

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Omicron threat in Pakistan

AS experts warned, it was only a matter of time before it would happen. Earlier this week, the first suspected case of the Omicron variant surfaced at a private hospital in Karachi. The patient, an unvaccinated middle-aged woman, has been discharged and is currently said to be isolating at home. In a video message released on Thursday, the Sindh Health Minister Azra Fazal Pechuho stated that while the behaviour of the virus indicated the presence of the Omicron variant, genome sequencing had yet to be confirmed. This variant, first reported in southern Africa, has spread to at least 57 countries. Though more research is needed, initial reports have suggested that this version of the coronavirus is more transmissible — even those who have previously contracted Covid are not immune. According to WHO, though the variant is potentially more transmissible, there was some evidence that it caused a milder infection than the Delta variant. In fact, up to Dec 6, all 212 Omicron cases reported from 18 European countries were categorised as asymptomatic or mild. This, however, warned the WHO, did not mean that caution could be thrown to the wind. Even if the infection is mild,

higher transmissibility means that more people will become infected resulting in more hospitalisations. In a country like Pakistan, where the health infrastructure is in a shambolic state, there is greater danger of the tertiary healthcare system becoming overwhelmed. It is good that the government, as a pre-emptive measure, banned flights from 16 countries and tightened protocols from 13 others. The Sindh government had also issued new guidelines.

Meanwhile, at a press conference last month, Federal Planning Minister Asad Umar and SAPM Health Dr Faisal Sultan talked about ramping up Covid-19 vaccination in light of the new variant. These measures notwithstanding, the government leaders should again stress the need for adhering to social distancing and other Covid-related SOPs in all public and private institutions. The WHO chief in his statement summed up the situation aptly: “Any complacency now will cost lives.”

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Smog: no end in sight

LAHORE and several other cities of Punjab are choking on smog, or winter air pollution. The provincial capital is especially suffering due to soot, dust and industrial pollutants trapped in the environment by the dropping temperature as it is being repeatedly ranked at the top of the list of the most polluted cities of the world owing to its hazardous air quality. Even though smog has become a regular feature of winter life in Lahore in recent years, the government has not taken consistent action to fight off what the WHO has termed as “new tobacco”. Instead, we have recently seen provincial ministers refusing to even acknowledge the existence of the menace. Multiple factors such as the increase in polluting industrial emissions, vehicular exhaust and construction dust, as well as the burning of cheaper fuels and urban and agricultural waste have aggravated the problem in recent years.

The government has responded with ad hoc actions to firefight the problem on a temporary rather than a sustainable basis. The utter failure of the administration to take durable measures to improve the air quality has inflicted severe, long-term harm on public health, putting people at greater risk for heart and lung diseases. For example, the authorities have achieved no success at all in dissuading growers from burning crop stubble, a major reason for the smog. A

long-term, sustainable solution to the winter air pollution is not simple. It requires a massive and decisive shift in government policies, and in the way the private sector does business. While the government must tweak its policies and invest heavily in renewable energy sources and public transport systems in the cities, the private sector needs to realise its responsibilities towards society and adopt technologies to reduce its carbon emissions. That will not be possible unless the government takes the required action. If the government procrastinates further, citizens should have no qualms about coming together to demand immediate action on an ongoing serious public health issue.

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Ceasefire terminated

NEGOTIATING 'peace' with the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, the extremist organisation responsible for murdering tens of thousands of people, was always going to be an uphill task, if not an entirely doomed undertaking. On Thursday, the militant group declared an end to its month-long ceasefire with the government, accusing it of reneging on confidence-building measures agreed upon as a prelude to more formal talks.

One of its demands was the release of around 100 low-level militants detained at deradicalisation centres. So far, the first batch of 12 such 'foot soldiers' have been released, with more to follow in the coming weeks — a pace not acceptable to the TTP. The group has also alleged that security forces, contrary to the terms of the agreement, have carried out raids in parts of KP and killed or captured militants. Some delay in the government's formation of its negotiating committee has been cited by the TTP as another reason for terminating the ceasefire.

That said, these appear to be pressure tactics stemming from divisions within the umbrella grouping of militant outfits over how to deal with the government's peace overtures. The Afghan Taliban, who are playing the role of mediators, may also be urging both sides to conclude an agreement soon because of their apprehensions, which would be shared by the TTP, that slow-moving negotiations and coercive measures instead of persuasion may lead to TTP elements breaking away and joining the militant Islamic State group.

The real roadblocks ahead, if talks resume, would be the red lines on which, as the government has already communicated to the TTP, there is no room for compromise. These include the TTP agreeing to abide by the Constitution as the fundamental law of the land, and backing down from its insistence on the enforcement of its version of Sharia and the restoration of the tribal districts to their pre-merger status.

That is a tall order. Peace deals with militants have a long, inglorious history in Pakistan. None of them, starting with the Shakai agreement in 2004 and the many others that followed, were sustainable. On the contrary, they have allowed militants to regroup, and strike back with even more force. In fact, the Swat agreement of 2008 resulted in the de facto surrender of the scenic valley to the Mullah Fazlullah-led TTP, enabling the latter to cement a brutal regime that made a mockery of the constitutionally protected rights that were still applicable in the area.

Each time, a military campaign has had to be conducted to dislodge the militants and wrest control from them. Expecting a different outcome this time around is unrealistic. Any 'peace' that would result would be a tenuous and transient one. The only practical course of action appears to be to revisit the National Action Plan, strengthen internal security and tackle the TTP according to the law of the land.

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Hoping for better ties

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's recent remarks that talks with India are not possible while a BJP-led government is in place reflect the fascist approach adopted by Narendra Modi towards Pakistan. But they also douse hope when it is most needed. Mr Khan has correctly noted that ties between Pakistan and India will deteriorate until the Indian prime minister's decision to annex held Kashmir is reversed — but such an event cannot come to pass without a dialogue and sustained engagement. Pakistan, especially under Mr Khan's rule, has put in considerable effort to engage with India and has made goodwill gestures. On more than one occasion, the prime minister himself has extended an olive branch and spoken of peace and coexistence. However, all his efforts have been snubbed. In the meanwhile, the opening and functioning of the

Kartarpur Corridor is a ray of hope initiated by Pakistan; it serves as a symbol of what is possible between the two nations if bitterness can be set aside and better sense can prevail. If Pakistan too adopts a hawkish approach towards India, how will outstanding issues such as Kashmir ever be resolved?

Unfortunately, the present BJP set-up under Mr Modi has an offensive, hateful and hyper-nationalist approach to relations with Pakistan. It has blocked Pakistan at every forum and even prevented Pakistani pilgrims from visiting holy sites in India. Not only that, artists and sportspersons on both sides, too, have lost out on numerous opportunities to work together. The BJP leaders' statements about Pakistan are as provocative and incendiary as ever, but still saner elements on both sides must continue to hope that engagement will resume and work towards that goal. Be it backchannel talks or the release of fishermen taken prisoners, Pakistan and India must maintain some semblance of a working relationship, for there is far too much at stake in the region. As Mr Khan noted, the burning issue of climate change is a key challenge that cannot be battled in isolation. Both countries face the consequences of extreme climate events and must reduce their carbon emissions as they grow their economies. Even with the reality of an ultra-hostile BJP under Mr Modi, hope must always be on the table as the future of nearly 2bn people depends on it. Blanket statements that engagement is impossible are unwise from either side as they hurt the possibility of small peace overtures and backchannel conversations.

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West Indies in Pakistan

THE first major cricketing nation to come to Pakistan for a full series since the 2009 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore is back in the country. And once again at a time when Pakistan needs to show the world that it is a safe venue for international cricket. West Indies last toured Pakistan in 2018, playing a three-match Twenty20 International series. They followed Zimbabwe — who visited in 2015 — and Sri Lanka — who played a lone Twenty20 in Lahore in October 2017 — in helping revive international cricket in Pakistan. This time, West Indies are the first team to tour Pakistan since New Zealand abandoned their scheduled series due to security concerns earlier this year and England followed suit by calling off their two-match T20 series, saying it would take a toll

on its players' mental health. All that happened before Pakistan proved at the Twenty20 World Cup that it remains one of the best teams in the game with a barnstorming run to the semi-finals where they lost to eventual champions Australia. England have since agreed to compensate Pakistan's losses by playing two additional T20s when they tour next year in their first series here since 2005. Australia are scheduled to tour before them in March for their first series here since 1998.

It's the West Indies series, though, which will reassure other cricketing nations about Pakistan's security situation. During the six matches, Australia's security consultants will be assessing the arrangements made by Pakistan. Like in 2018, though, West Indies are shorn of some of their top players who have opted out due to personal reasons. Their captain, Kieron Pollard, was ruled out due to injury. Pakistan, therefore, start the series as favourites. Babar Azam's men followed up their World Cup performance with a 3-0 sweep of hosts Bangladesh in their T20 series last month. While anything other than a victory in both series for Pakistan would be a surprise, cricket fans have more reasons to rejoice: international cricket is back again in Pakistan.

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Centre-Sindh sparring

AFTER a considerable delay, the multibillion-rupee Green Line bus service was inaugurated in Karachi by the prime minister on Friday. The federally funded scheme, launched by the then PML-N-led federal government in 2016, has ended up costing over double its original estimate due to the frequent delays in execution. To the people of Karachi, deprived of a decent public transport system for decades, the Green Line may be too little too late, but it is hoped that the launch of this project helps usher in better commuting facilities for the country's largest city.

However, whether it is public transport or other basic civic services, the fact is that the severe lack of service delivery has been exacerbated by the toxic centre-Sindh relationship, with both sides frequently launching critiques of the other's initiatives. But on Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan offered an olive branch to the Sindh government, asking the latter to work with the federal government for the betterment of Karachi.

The fact is that both sides need to rise above the blame game and make efforts for Karachi's uplift. Certainly, cooperation between the centre and Sindh in public transport projects, water schemes, the health card initiative etc. is required to improve basic service delivery in Sindh. Efforts at cooperation have been thwarted by unnecessary criticism of the Sindh government and perceived interference in provincial affairs by federal ministers. But PPP officials and ministers in Sindh have also used the centre as a punching bag whenever there has been criticism of administration in the province, and cannot claim the moral high ground where good governance is concerned — for instance, food prices in Karachi are higher than in many other cities, without any justification.

Yet it is also a fact that PTI MNAs — the party received a heavy mandate from the metropolis in the last general elections — have failed to deliver. Instead of spending time in their constituencies so they can understand the problems of their voters, most lawmakers appear to remain aloof and confine themselves to making statements critical of their political opponents.

Looking beyond petty politics, both sides should bury the hatchet and work for the betterment of Karachi and the rest of Sindh. The PPP should respond positively to the prime minister's offer of expanding the health card scheme to Sindh and not resist it simply on political grounds, as the healthcare situation in the province is appalling.

Moreover, the bus rapid transit schemes in Karachi are another area where both the centre and Sindh can cooperate where finances, logistics and expertise are concerned. On its part, the centre would do well to respect the principle of provincial autonomy and offer Sindh full support. Both must remember that the common goal is the welfare of the people of Sindh — even if it means letting go of their respective egos for a while.

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Gwadar sit-in

THERE exists in mankind an instinct to throw off the yoke of oppression. The tipping point may come after years of injustice and hardship, but it will come and when it does, the people will rise and demand they be heard. That is what appears to be unfolding in Gwadar city where tens of thousands of locals as well

as people from surrounding districts have been protesting for close to a month — that too without a party flag in sight. Their numbers continue to swell and, most surprisingly for a conservative society, women are participating in droves — not just standing by silently, but speaking articulately and forcefully about their rights.

Led by Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman, general secretary of the Jamaat-i-Islami's Balochistan chapter, the 'Gwadar ko haq do' movement, as it is known, has some 20 demands that it wants the provincial government to fulfil. Several of them pertain to the severe shortage of drinking water and the dire state of educational and health facilities in the area, as well as the devastating impact that illegal fishing by trawlers along the coast has had on the livelihoods of local fishermen. A week ago, the provincial government announced it had accepted the protesters' demands and urged Maulana Hidayat to call off the sit-in.

However, the people — long familiar with the empty gestures of officialdom — are not going to be mollified so easily. A transfer here and there, a promise to review policy, an announcement to form committees — these tactics will not cut it. The crescendo of voices demanding their rights is only growing louder and the mass of humanity gathering day after day in the port city shows no sign of dispersing. It is a rare development in the highly securitised province which inevitably scores the lowest on the country's human development indices. That the protest is taking place in the shadow of the port long projected as the centrepiece of the multi-billion-dollar CPEC project is a damning indictment of the authorities' skewed priorities.

As Maulana Hidayat said in a TV interview a couple of days ago: "When the Gwadar port has brought no prosperity to those living in its vicinity, what good can it do for the people in the rest of the country?" The Balochistan government and the security establishment must take concrete, verifiable measures to address the protesters' demands. Otherwise Gwadar could become the spark in a tinderbox of disaffection.

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Energy reforms

PAKISTAN'S energy sector is in a total mess, riddled with shortages, inefficiencies, massive debt, dependence on imported fossil fuels etc. We have

consolidated different energy-related ministries and institutions under one ministry but failed to develop a comprehensive and integrated policy for ensuring national energy security. The lack of a well-defined national energy strategy also means the absence of a proper mechanism for coordination among different entities, which mostly work in silos and often in opposite directions. Thus, the government has never been able to do more than firefight at times of crises. Not only is this a serious threat to Pakistan's fragile economy and energy security, it also imposes massive additional costs on the consumers.

Take the example of the power sector. The country has dramatically enhanced its generation capacity over the last few years. Yet frequent blackouts continue because we did not invest in the distribution infrastructure to evacuate power from the plants to consumers. Likewise, we have unused, surplus LNG re-gasification capacity — which can be increased significantly in no time — at the two terminals in Karachi. But the government's reluctance to allow them third-party access is keeping us from increasing imports to meet gas shortfalls in the winter. Hence, we see massive gas rationing for various sectors as temperatures fall. The authorities' unwillingness to implement politically unpopular policy changes to address the worsening situation means that no company is prepared to invest capital in local oil and gas exploration. The story of local oil refineries operating at 60pc-65pc of their capacity is no different as the government imports refined products at the expense of precious foreign exchange.

So it would not be incorrect to point out that our energy troubles are more complex than they appear to be, and are more rooted in bad governance and lack of political will than supply shortages alone. In the late 2000s and the first half of the 2010s, energy shortages were estimated to have cost the country up to 4pc of GDP, forcing hundreds of factories to close down and leaving tens of thousands of workers jobless. Sadly, the economy is paying this price even today in spite of investments of billions of borrowed dollars in generation capacity under CPEC. Resolving the energy crisis requires much more than implementing supply-side fixes. The public energy sector cannot be repaired without deep governance and management reforms to remove inefficiencies and plug leakages. Nevertheless, reforms will not help overcome energy troubles unless there is competition from private parties and significant public investments are made in infrastructure. Indeed, the task is not easy as it will involve many politically unpopular decisions. But this bitter pill will have to be swallowed for the

sake of the nation's economy and the consumers. The government can start by developing an integrated energy policy with clearly defined goals and milestones.

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State of human rights

IN the run-up to World Human Rights Day observed last week, Pakistani society exposed its worst instincts as a mob lynched a factory manager and an infuriated crowd allegedly stripped four women rag-pickers. What was also apparent was the state's inability to act in time. Or did it deliberately keep itself in the dark?

It is, in fact, a selective blindness that prevents the state from ensuring the fundamental and constitutional rights of the people, in spite of the laws of the land and the international conventions it has ratified. Indeed, it is dichotomous approach: on the one hand it has professed its aim of truly becoming a welfare state, whereas on the other it has turned a blind eye to the people's sufferings, and in fact, has become a party to them — as evident in the massive eviction drives in urban areas that has left thousands without a roof over their heads.

This year's theme for World Human Rights Day, 'reducing inequalities — advancing human rights', is an apt reminder of the many deadly blows that have been dealt to the already fragile state of equality and justice in the country.

We have seen peaceful protesters such as teachers, students, health workers and residents, whose homes have been reduced to rubble, encounter the full might of the state, whereas tolerance is reserved for ultra-conservative elements who control the streets or even kill and maim in the name of religion. Similarly, there are those who go missing when they raise a voice for the rights of their people, never to be seen again, while there is no accountability of the elements whose actions led to their disappearance in the first place.

Unfortunately, when the state does not believe in an even-handed approach in the application of justice, a sense of impunity seeps into society itself — not surprising when we consider that the public takes its cue from those who govern them. Unfortunately, successive governments have viewed even basic human rights as acts of charity to be dispensed at will. This mindset is reflected in practically all spheres of life, including the justice system itself. And it is what prevents the state from investing in policies and institutions for human and social

development that could have rescued the people from the forces of exploitation. Respect for human rights in the country can only be instituted when the state is ready to admit and rectify its own approach.

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A demoralising decision

A UK High Court decision allowing the extradition of Julian Assange to the US comes as a blow not just to the WikiLeaks founder but also to democracy and media everywhere. The US wants Mr Assange for the publication of thousands of classified documents between 2010 and 2011. In January this year, a UK court said he could not be extradited due to concerns for his mental health. Last week, however, the US won an appeal after the court accepted assurances that Mr Assange would not face strict prison conditions, which was the basis for the earlier ruling. The decision is devastating for Mr Assange's family and friends who are concerned about whether he can survive prison. But it is also a message from the US that whistle-blowers and those that expose uncomfortable realities will be pursued and punished.

Mr Assange's revelations were very much in the public interest. Instead of seeing them as such, and as falling in the realm of free speech, American authorities went after him with desperation, and gave assurances to the court regarding better prison conditions. US prison conditions are often seen as a grave issue by UK courts during extradition trials, and in its efforts to successfully extradite individuals, the US has gone to great lengths to persuade judges that detention conditions will not be inhumane. America's actions paint a sorry picture of a country that prides itself as a champion of rights and democracy. Punishing Mr Assange for lifting the lid on grave abuses committed by the US administration in Iraq — documents that were published by media outlets — flies in the face of democratic ideals. An appeal to the high court may buy Mr Assange a few more years. But the fact remains that he has been detained in some way or the other for 11 years. The US should not pursue this extradition case, and the UK must not allow it, because revelations like Mr Assange's allow the media to hold the powerful accountable and demand a more just world.

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Taliban recognition

Pakistan readies itself to host a special session of the OIC next week, Afghan officials have reiterated calls for the international community to accord recognition to the Taliban government.

In an interview, the Taliban chief spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid called on the OIC to recognise the government in the upcoming meeting of its Council of Foreign Ministers. The spokesman said the OIC should support the Taliban government by recognising it.

The Dec 19 meeting in Islamabad is aimed at drawing the world's attention to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Afghanistan. The session will include delegations from the EU and the P5 group of the UN Security Council. With the onset of winter, there are increasing fears that Afghanistan could be facing a humanitarian disaster triggered by shortages of food, medicines and a collapsing economy. The UN has issued urgent appeals for intervention by the international community and financial pledges have already been made.

However, in the absence of formal recognition, aid organisations are finding it difficult to put in place a system through which desperately needed humanitarian aid can reach the people who need it most in Afghanistan.

The OIC conference provides an important platform to raise these difficult questions and work towards finding answers. The West continues to maintain that the Taliban government has not done enough to prove that it is not following regressive policies against women and minorities. While not denying the need to ensure that the looming humanitarian disaster is averted, Western officials maintain that formal recognition will only follow some substantive changes in the way that the Taliban are running the government. At the OIC meeting, it is important for member countries to take a holistic look at the precarious situation in Afghanistan and somehow figure out how to narrow the gap between what the international community expects and demands from the Taliban and what the Taliban are willing to and can deliver.

Pakistan has been at the forefront of urging greater engagement with the Taliban because it stands to lose the most if Afghanistan is hit by instability. There are already signs that violence can flare up at any time. Sporadic incidents of

violence, often perpetrated by the IS in Afghanistan, have illustrated the state of insecurity in the country. If the situation worsens and the economy starts to collapse, it would attract greater instability, violence and chaos.

It is hoped that the OIC members, as well as the EU and P5 delegations can produce solutions that can minimise the looming threat of a disaster in Afghanistan and activate a serious review of the recognition issue. At the same time, the OIC members should also press the Taliban government to show greater flexibility and responsiveness to the demands of the international community. They cannot remain rigid in the face of the troubles that surround them.

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Sindh LG bill

THE controversy over Sindh's local government law refuses to die down, as the PPP-led administration bulldozed amendments to the bill on Saturday in a stormy session of the provincial assembly. The Sindh Local Government (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which had been first passed by the House late last month, had earlier been sent back by the governor without assent as it ignited a storm of criticism from the opposition for apparently disempowering Sindh's urban areas. Saturday's session was anything but smooth sailing, as the opposition launched a fresh protest after the speaker did not let them speak on the bill. A walkout by opposition lawmakers allowed the treasury to pass the amended bill. However, unless there is consensus on such an important law, governance in Sindh will be affected and the continued poor civic state of its cities and towns is likely to get worse. While the PPP claims the opposition's suggestions have been incorporated in the bill, parties on the other side of the aisle obviously feel the changes have not gone far enough. A number of parties gathered at a multiparty conference organised by the MQM-P on Saturday expressed their reservations over the bill, calling for more administrative and financial powers for the LGs.

Much has been written about the horrible state of civic affairs in Sindh. The PPP has concentrated nearly all municipal powers with the provincial government, leaving the elected local bodies largely toothless. The positive aspects of the Musharraf-era LG system had been done away with, leaving the province's cities and towns in an utter mess, particularly Karachi. Therefore, amendments to the

LG law are essential. However, bulldozing these without the input of all of Sindh's political stakeholders is unlikely to improve matters. Even PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari had admitted earlier that the LG amendments had been passed in "haste", while the Sindh chief minister told the House that further amendments could be made during the PA session, though his choice of words on the ethnic situation in Sindh were inappropriate. Considering the sustained criticism of the bill from across the political divide, the PPP needs to further fine-tune the amendments and incorporate legitimate concerns, specifically concerning financially and legally empowered local bodies. Concentration of power either by the centre or the provinces defies the spirit of the 18th Amendment and flies in the face of democratic norms, which is why all of Sindh's stakeholders need to be on board.

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Ending tobacco use

THE cancer, literally, of smoking has proved one of the most endemic preventable dangers to human well-being (it kills 7m people annually) — from the deleterious effects on people and families, to the burden on healthcare systems, to economic losses caused by poor workforce productivity. But despite a sustained global effort to counter the habit, we keep smoking. Why this is so is because of the strength and stealth of the tobacco industry, which collectively commands billions of dollars across the world: where it comes under pressure in one place, because of anti-smoking laws and taxation that are in place in many countries, Pakistan included, it raises its ugly head in another. It is with some air of hopelessness, then, that last week in Islamabad the Pakistan National Heart Association issued an open letter urging persons in positions of social influence to be wary of being lured into a campaign titled 'Ab Khasara bus Khudara' that has been launched by the industry in protest against taxation on cigarettes. The government's Tobacco Control Cell tells us that least 23.9m adults use tobacco in some form. Amongst the youth (13-15 years of age), 13.3pc and 6.6pc girls are tobacco users. The WHO notes that tobacco use here is continuing to grow due to "steady population growth, low prices, lack of awareness [...] and aggressive tobacco industry marketing efforts". This is so despite measures the country has put in place including bans on sales to minors, smoking in public places, and on advertisements.

Contrast this with New Zealand's move, also last week, to instal a circuit-breaker. According to the plan, people aged 14 and under in 2027 will (amongst other measures) never, in their entire lifetimes, be allowed to purchase cigarettes. The Pacific country argues that other efforts are taking too long; thus, "new cohorts of youth" must be aggressively protected. If such prohibition is indeed what it will take to extinguish the habit, then be done it must. Panah and others must stick to their guns.

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Health insurance

RESEARCH suggests that hundreds of thousands of families in the country fall into economic distress in the process of seeking healthcare, especially given the persistent shortage of doctors, medicine and infrastructure in the public healthcare sector. It is a problem that the federal government's Sehat Sahulat Programme aims to remedy through health insurance for all. On Monday, the programme celebrated another milestone when the prime minister announced that universal health coverage would now extend to the whole of Punjab. Earlier, the programme had been limited to a few divisions in the province. Under the Sehat Sahulat Programme, registered families are able to get free treatment worth up to Rs1m from certain public and private hospitals. About 30m families are to be given Sehat Sahulat cards in Punjab, whereas the scheme already covers KP's 6.7m families. The poor are already financially disenfranchised and cannot access costly private hospitals, which is why many of them turn to quacks. Even in government-run hospitals, the treatment of all patients is not equal due to socioeconomic factors. By making healthcare universal, the cards would act as an equaliser and give the economically marginalised — by granting them access to private facilities — a sense of ownership in the system.

Other provinces and semi-autonomous zones in the country have also agreed to become part of the scheme, with the exception of the Sindh government. PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari said on Monday that the Sehat Sahulat scheme favoured the private hospitals and that the health card could not even cover a single day's expenditure on expensive treatments offered at various government hospitals in Sindh. Even if the PPP chairman's arguments have merit, it should not prevent the Sindh government from at least discussing the salient features of

the health scheme with the federal government. Sindh has some of the country's worst health indicators and public hospitals and its population would benefit immensely from universal health coverage. The Sindh government should not play petty politics and must refrain from standing between the people and their right to free healthcare.

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Financing provinces

THE decision in principle to stop federal development financing for provincial projects, mostly those pertaining to subjects transferred from the centre to the federating units under the 18th Amendment, may have some unintended political implications for the federation, besides increasing the smaller provinces' developmental backlog. The intention itself is understandable as the cash-strapped centre is under enormous pressure from the IMF to scale down development spending to ensure positive primary balance, or fiscal balance adjusted for net interest payments on federal debt, to eventually reduce its debt burden. Additionally, Islamabad wants to refocus its limited resources on large national infrastructure schemes by restricting its investment to areas of federal responsibilities and ensuring that the provinces take full fiscal charge of all the devolved subjects. But can it justify the decision?

Technically, the federal government has the right to withdraw from the responsibility of supporting provincial development. That was the primary objective of increasing the provincial share in federal tax receipts under the seventh NFC award before the devolution of 16 federal ministries to the provinces. However, it was contingent upon the federal and provincial tax agencies to create adequate fiscal resources for both the centre and the federating units. That hasn't happened yet. Actually, the FBR's failure to attain its tax collection targets, let alone raise the tax-to-GDP ratio, means a widening resource gap for provincial development programmes. The drastic surge in the current spending of the provinces, mainly the smaller ones, on account of their fast growing pay and pension bills, and other expenditures has further squeezed their capacity to implement their development agenda. So, in a way, Islamabad has an obligation to support them by cutting down its own unnecessary expenditure, particularly on the ministries it has devolved to the provinces.

Politically, the decision will intensify the friction between the federation and its units. For example, the move is being seen as an attempt to put a squeeze on Sindh being ruled by the PPP. The PTI has been at loggerheads with the PPP administration in the province, with its ministers and leaders picking up unnecessary fights with the provincial government. The PPP government is accused of corruption and wasting the resources it gets under the NFC. So the move will likely be seen in the context of the relationship between the PTI and PPP at a time when the new elections are approaching. But these centre-province tensions will not be limited to Sindh. Balochistan largely depends on federal money for its development since its scanty financial resources fall far short of its large development needs. The wiser course for the PTI leadership will be to take all provinces on board before making a final decision and gradually restrict its role in provincial development. More importantly, it must focus on increasing the tax base and revenue collection; expenditure cuts cannot be a long-term solution.

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India's rhetoric

INDIAN Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has uttered words against Pakistan that are as unfortunate and inadvisable as they are provocative and inflammable. In what can clearly be termed as an error of judgement, the defence minister said that India's partition on religious lines was a mistake and that Pakistan wanted to break India. He also accused Pakistan of fomenting terrorism and proxy war against India.

In response to these unwarranted utterances, a spokesman of Pakistan's Foreign Office released a lengthy statement in which he condemned the Indian defence minister's remarks and linked them to the upcoming elections in Uttar Pradesh and other states by "inciting hyper nationalism".

Politicians belonging to the BJP have always used Pakistan-bashing to peddle their political agenda and such is the sentiment they have whipped up over the years that their incendiary propaganda ends up paying them electoral dividends. It is a sad reflection on the state of Indian society and politics when obsessing with Pakistan by indulging in fanciful — and often downright silly — allegations

elicits vociferous reactions and becomes a rallying point for disparate political elements.

It would be hard to find a parallel in Pakistan — and thankfully so. In fact, almost all the major political parties in Pakistan still propagate improved relations with India and are desirous of peace through resolution of disputes. This explains why India-bashing is not an electioneering phenomenon in Pakistan, possibly because it does not sell among the voters.

The stark contrast with Indian politicians and their voters is therefore a reminder to everyone in the world who wants to listen that if there is a major impediment to peace in South Asia, it is clearly not Pakistan.

While a deeper analysis of the toxicity infecting the Indian political scene is critical at a time when Indian society is lurching to the right, and is writhing in the fever of intolerance, hate and anti-Muslim bigotry, it is important to state with repeated emphasis that statements like the one by the Indian defence minister can have serious consequences for peace between the two countries.

The BJP leadership should think twice before unloosening their tongues with such infantile irresponsibility. At the same time, Pakistan's Foreign Office does not need to respond to such statements and therefore give them more attention than they merit. It is better to ignore such rhetoric and get on with the business of the state.

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East Pakistan lessons

FIFTY years ago on this day, Pakistan's eastern wing broke away to form the independent nation of Bangladesh following a bloody spasm of violence. It was a tragedy of immense proportions but the denialism that existed in 1971 among residents in the west wing still pervades our national consciousness today.

That year, the day after Dhaka fell, newspapers carried headlines quoting the then president and military ruler Gen Yahya Khan as saying that the war would continue till victory. A less conspicuous news item carried truer details: Indian troops had entered Dhaka and fighting had stopped "following an arrangement between the local commanders of India and Pakistan...". While for West

Pakistanis Dhaka had fallen, most in the eastern wing saw it as 'liberation'. Censorship had kept West Pakistanis in the dark about the situation.

Half a century later, many questions still remain unanswered. For instance, why, for decades, was the population of East Pakistan treated as second-class citizens resulting in their alienation from the state? Ayub Khan's One Unit scheme merging West Pakistan's provinces to create 'parity' between both wings was actually an attempt to counter the eastern wing's numerical majority.

Unfortunately, successive governments in Pakistan have failed to officially release the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report that probed the debacle. Whatever of its contents are known serves as an indictment of the policies of the then federal government vis-à-vis the East Pakistanis. Indeed, the Indians played a reprehensible role by meddling in the country's internal affairs. But it was united Pakistan's own weaknesses that allowed them to do so.

One of the most egregious mistakes was to deny the majority their right to form a government after the 1970 elections. Instead, a military operation was launched in March 1971 in the eastern wing. Thousands fled to India for refuge. Innocent people were killed on both sides — Bengalis as well as non-Bengalis living in the eastern wing — by state forces and Bengali militias.

Unfortunately, few lessons have been learnt from that tragedy. Denying people their rights, including the right to information, imposing the will of the few on the many, and resorting to authoritarian tactics are still the preferred methods of those who control the levers of power in Pakistan.

Fifty years later, a thorough and honest national debate is still pending on the separation of the eastern wing so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. If a section of people agitates for their rights, they are not working against the state; they are simply seeking the fundamental safeguards promised to them in the Constitution — they cannot be termed traitors as they were in East Pakistan. Evolving better ties with Bangladesh is in Pakistan's interest but fulfilling the social contract at home, between citizens and the state, must also be on the list of priorities.

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Indelible memories

SOME tragedies are so soul-searing, so monumental, that their imprint remains permanently etched in the nation's collective consciousness. The terrorist attack on APS Peshawar seven years ago was precisely such an episode.

Nearly 150 people, including 132 children, lost their lives when TTP militants stormed the school and, in the most horrific orgy of violence imaginable, went from room to room slaughtering students and staff members. It was the second deadliest terrorist attack in Pakistan, but in terms of impact it was unprecedented. Distraught parents milling at the gates while the attack was underway, not knowing whether their children were alive or dead; images of the carnage that soon surfaced on social media; and the tender farewells to so many who died far too young — there remains a montage of indelible memories. That is even more so for the students who survived and for the families of the dead whose lives were forever changed on Dec 16, 2014.

For a time, it seemed the attack had catalysed a degree of soul-searching and strengthened the state's resolve to fight religious extremism. The 20-point National Action Plan was the outcome of the civilian and military leaderships' consensus that the country needed to chart a different course. That initial resolve, however, soon dissipated and became mired in inaction and procedural delays.

The state instead resorted to facile steps such as lifting the unofficial moratorium on capital cases — feeding a wounded nation's bloodlust instead of taking the difficult, far-reaching measures that could eliminate the root causes of extremism from society. It even gave short shrift to the grief of the families of the APS Peshawar victims and their anger over why the attack had taken place at all, particularly in the light of intelligence about the TTP planning an assault on an army-run educational institution.

The families ran from pillar to post seeking accountability of those whose negligence had allowed the massacre to happen. It took well over three years before a judicial commission was set up to look into the matter. The 525-page report it submitted to the Supreme Court in July 2020 assailed the security lapses and the “unpardonable” assistance given to the militants by locals in the area.

Given we are angling for talks with the very group that exulted in the murder of our children, have we learnt anything from the tragedy of APS Peshawar?

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Financial inclusion

IN the last few years, the State Bank has taken some important initiatives to reduce the large-scale financial exclusion in the country. It recently directed commercial banks to address women's exclusion by helping them access banking services. Now it has launched the Asaan Mobile Account initiative, which, given its ease of use, is expected by the bank to give nearly 50m unbanked low-income Pakistanis access to banking services through their mobile phones. The initiative will allow people, who don't even have internet connectivity, to open accounts with 13 banks by dialling a code. There is a potential market of around 81m mobile subscribers who don't have access to the internet and could become users of AMA "if provided with the right value proposition", according to the State Bank governor. The AMA would especially help women access formal financial services by overcoming mobility, cultural and documentation barriers. Besides, it will help the government reach out to and disburse cash among 15m beneficiaries of the Ehsaas Programme. Indeed, the initiative is a welcome push for prioritising the financial inclusion of millions of unbanked Pakistanis. Financial exclusion is a major issue in Pakistan, which remains a cash economy with trillions in hard currency still in circulation outside the formal financial system. For a long time, the government and the central bank have been struggling to increase financial inclusion. But neither has so far proved very effective. For the right or wrong reasons, financial inclusion has become synonymous with the opening of a bank account. The policy focus on 'ease of opening bank accounts' is a major factor. This approach can produce only a limited impact. Luckily, digital technology has provided us with a platform to rapidly reduce the ratio of the financially excluded population by linking people with formal financial services. Yet the dream of greater financial inclusion cannot be realised unless the economically disadvantaged segments of society are linked to easy-to-use credit services as shown by the success of microfinance banking in the country.

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Access to justice

MUCH has been said about Pakistanis' lack of access to justice — and rightly so. From the convoluted workings of the court system, leading to a massive backlog of cases, to inefficient investigation and poor prosecution, the troubles are myriad. There have been efforts to address the issues and pledges from the corridors of justice to resolve the pending cases on an urgent footing; these are to be praised. But often overlooked is the single point from where access to justice begins: a citizen's ability to have a complaint heard, recorded and registered. Only when this first step is achieved can there begin to be any hope of accountability. But how many take this first, crucial step seriously? Very few apparently. For instance, it emerged in Islamabad on Wednesday that of an estimated 6,000 complaints lodged with the police helpdesk Rescue15 over the past 10 months in the capital city, a mere 1,568 cases had actually been registered — ie no action was taken. The police record was examined on the directives of the recently appointed IGP Ahsan Younas to ascertain the actual crime rate in the capital. The registered cases include murder and attempts thereof, kidnappings, robberies and vehicle theft, amongst other categories. The tiny number of cases registered versus complaints that went unrecorded provides a measure of how the system works to the detriment of the aggrieved parties.

If this is the state of the relatively well-policed and geographically contained Islamabad Capital Territory, one can only imagine the situation in other areas. It is no wonder that amongst the citizenry in general, the belief has taken root that there is little point in approaching the law enforcers. Thus the incidence of crimes being reported, especially the 'hidden' ones such as rape, remains misleadingly low — dangerously so. For its part, the police force across the country is under-resourced and ill-trained; unresolved but registered crimes on the books reflect badly on the force. This double bind must be resolved if a way forward is to be found.

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Monetary tightening

THE T-bill auction results on Wednesday underscore that the State Bank's credibility is at its lowest point at the moment. The money/bond market snubbed it as banks kept the cost of fresh government borrowings of Rs1.3tr unchanged at the higher level of the previous sale of the short-term debt instruments on Dec 1.

Higher premiums being charged by the banks imply that they are still anticipating a further increase in the interest rate in the immediate to near term. This is in complete disregard of the State Bank's new 'forward guidance' given in its latest monetary policy statement to end uncertainty in the market and suggesting that the latest round of monetary tightening is over for the moment after Tuesday's hike of 100bps in the key policy rate to 9.75pc.

The latest monetary policy states that the central bank feels that the "end goal of mildly positive real interest rates on a forward-looking basis was now close to being achieved". It expects "monetary policy settings to remain broadly unchanged in the near term". That is not all, though.

The monetary policy statement also expresses the central bank's disapproval of the previous sharp rise in secondary market yields, benchmark rates and cut-off rates in T-bill auctions across all tenors, noting that this increase appeared to be unwarranted. The way that the banks have reacted to the latest rate increase suggests that the market uncertainty will take a while to dissipate.

It is correct that the monetary policy works with a lag. But anticipation of further monetary tightening in the wake of the expected resumption of IMF funding in the next month or two proves that the markets are not responding to the central bank's policy assurances. They have valid reasons for their doubts, the primary one being that the bank has been too slow to correctly assess the negative impact of the unprecedented monetary and fiscal stimulus given to pump growth ahead of the 2023 election.

It had us believe that all was well with the economy and it reacted slowly to the surging inflation and widening current account deficit. And when realisation struck, the bank pressed the panic button, ditching its previous forward guidance

of “gradual and measured” stimulus tapering to mitigate the risks to inflation at the expense of its credibility.

What is also clear is that the markets are still unsure about the government’s deal with the IMF and what it means for interest rates going forward. The upward revision by the State Bank of inflation projections to 9pc-11pc and the current account deficit to 4pc of GDP for the current fiscal is being seen as rather optimistic given the upside risks. Will the central bank succeed in ending market uncertainty in the days ahead? We will know at the time of the next T-bill auction later this month.

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Islamophobia envoy

OVER the past two decades, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ensuing spread of transnational terrorism in the name of religion, Islamophobia has grown greatly across the globe. Peaceful, hardworking Muslims have been targeted — sometimes in deadly attacks — by bigots due to the acts of some violent actors using the name of Islam for ulterior motives. In this regard, the recent bill passed in the US calling for the appointment of a special envoy to monitor and combat Islamophobia is a positive development. However, the effort to get the bill passed in the US House of Representatives itself reflects the polarisation within America. Sponsored by Muslim lawmaker Ilhan Omar and Jewish Representative Jan Schakowsky, both Democrats, the bill’s intentions appear to be good, though it faced stiff opposition from Republican lawmakers, with 212 voting against it. This perhaps reflects the current ambivalence towards Muslims within the Republican party, particularly after four years of Trumpism. The bill was in part motivated when a Republican lawmaker taunted Rep Omar, labelling her as part of the “Jihad squad”.

As for the objectives of the bill, rampant Islamophobia in the US and other states where Muslims are in a minority has necessitated the need for such laws. The Muslim world has clearly not done enough to check movements that use Islam to promote violence, and unfortunately, peaceful people of Muslim background have had to pay the price for the bloodthirsty violence perpetrated by terrorist groups. Muslims across the world have had to face verbal and physical abuse as well as deadly violence simply because of the religion they profess, and official

steps to counter this discrimination are crucial. However, if the bill — which calls for monitoring Islamophobia worldwide — is passed by the Senate and becomes law, one hopes it does not become a victim of geopolitics. For example, as with protecting human rights in general, it has been witnessed that the Western bloc tends to come down hard on geopolitical foes, while looking the other way when allies engage in questionable behaviour. In the case of Islamophobia, two staunch American allies — Israel and India — have indulged in virulently Islamophobic behaviour at the state level. Israel's atrocious treatment of the Palestinians certainly falls within the description of anti-Muslim violence. Moreover, BJP-led India has also declared open season on Muslims, with Hindutva supporters terrorising Muslims. It is hoped the American anti-Islamophobia envoy calls out these egregious violations.

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Cricket and Covid

FOR Pakistan cricket and its fans, the joy of winning yet another series was tempered by the postponement of another. West Indies were the first team to tour the country since New Zealand abandoned their tour in September due to a perceived security risk and the fallout from that saw England withdraw its team from a tour in October. The West Indies series was a chance for Pakistan to restore its reputation as a safe venue for international cricket. That it did with the T20 series, which Pakistan swept 3-0, but the ODI series was postponed till June 2022 after the West Indies had a Covid-19 outbreak in its squad. The PCB stopped short of calling it an outbreak, proceeding with the final T20 on Thursday despite five more members — including three players — found to be infected after three cricketers and a support staffer had tested positive before the start of the series. It said that there was no breach in the bubble environment and instead the players had contracted the virus during transit on the way to Pakistan.

That, sadly, is the reality in this Covid world. And in the sporting world, where travel is essential, this has been a usual occurrence. Covid rules and restrictions vary from country to country and had Pakistan had regulations similar to Australia, the third T20 would never have happened. After being deemed a close contact, Australian skipper Pat Cummins was forced to sit out the second Ashes

Test this week as he was required to isolate despite returning a negative PCR test. In English football, Omicron — the latest Covid variant — has created havoc with the Premier League fixture list as several matches have been called off since the last week. Germany's Bundesliga has returned to fan restrictions. Despite the vaccinations, Covid remains an omnipresent threat and while some sporting events might go on smoothly, others might not. And the postponement of the West Indies ODIs was an example of the latter.

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Promises to keep

CALM has once again descended on Gwadar city, which has been roiled by massive, month-long protests by citizens for their basic rights, but how sustainable is the peace? It all depends on whether the state understands the depth of disaffection within Baloch society.

The protesters called off their sit-in on Thursday following successful negotiations with the government. The provincial Minister for Planning and Development Mir Zahoor Buledi tweeted: "Government has accepted all demands of Maulana [Hidayat]" who had been leading the dharna. Federal ministers Asad Umar and Zubaida Jalal and the SAPM on CPEC Affairs Khalid Mansoor also visited the port city the same day on the prime minister's instructions to try and resolve the issue.

Chief Minister Qudoos Bizenjo reportedly met with the protesters to tell them that all their demands were "legitimate" and that a complete ban had been imposed on illegal fishing in the waters off the coast. Chinese trawlers plying in the sea have been a source of enormous anger among the residents because they were robbing the local fishermen of their livelihood and were perhaps the final straw that compelled them to come out on the streets.

On the face of it, Gwadar city should have been an unlikely location for a rights-based demonstration, already a rarity in Balochistan's heavily securitised environment — not counting sit-ins by the Shia Hazaras in Quetta to protest sectarian violence against them. The port, after all, is the centrepiece of the much-vaunted economic corridor that has long been touted as a 'game changer' for the country, and especially for those living in its shadow. But the fact that tens

of thousands of people — not only from Gwadar but also from other districts — participated in the dharna was testament to an ugly reality that people in Pakistan's largest province live with every day.

Balochistan has been historically, egregiously, neglected and while the proceeds from its vast stores of mineral deposits enrich the coffers of the ruling elite and perhaps the state, even the basic needs of the residents are not met. Consider the demands of the protesters: aside from a ban on trawler fishing, several of them centred on the lack of education and health facilities, and the extreme shortage of electricity and drinking water.

There is also the question of dignity. One of the demands was for unnecessary check posts in Gwadar, Kech and Panjgur to be abolished. Residents in these districts complain of being treated like strangers in their own land, questioned about their movements, restricted from certain areas after sunset, etc — humiliating actions reminiscent of a colonial state rather than a federation. They deepen the sense of alienation among the Baloch, a simmering anger on which separatist elements capitalise. One hopes this time the state follows through on the promises it has made to the hapless people of Balochistan.

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Suffocating the press

THE World Press Freedom Index Report 2021 compiled by Reporters Sans Frontières this week paints a dark and foreboding picture of global press freedoms. Two of the four deadliest countries for journalists — India and Afghanistan — are from South Asia. The NGO also said that though the number of journalist killings has gone down somewhat, with 46 dead as compared to the previous year's 50, the number of journalists being detained "has never been this high since RSF began publishing its annual round-up in 1995". This points to the menacing environment in which journalists all over the world continue to operate and publish their work. According to the report, 488 journalists and media workers are in prison as of mid-December 2021, which is 20pc more than at the same time last year. The report paints a sorry picture of South Asia, where intimidation of journalists continues unabated. In India in particular, too many activists and journalists who have not toed the Modi government line have been

vilified, hounded and punished. In an Afghanistan now under Taliban rule, the threats to mediapersons, particularly women, are amplified.

While the report marks a slight improvement in Pakistan, the reality is that the environment for journalists remains toxic. The proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority bodes ill for the future of press freedom. And the reality of working in the media — where critics are kept off air or hounded and media workers fear for their jobs — is ugly. The report points out that while the Pakistani media has a long tradition of being lively, it has become a key target for the “deep state”, which “exercises a significant degree of control over the civilian executive”. It also notes the influence of the establishment over the media “has increased dramatically since Imran Khan became prime minister in July 2018”. It cites instances of “brazen censorship” through the restricting of newspaper distribution, threats to pull advertising and jamming television signals. “Journalists who dared to broach subjects deemed off limits ... have been subjected to harassment campaigns”, the report says, adding that several were abducted last year and warned to stop covering unwelcome stories or they would not be found alive. By all accounts, this is a deadly and suffocating environment for journalists which points to a democracy in name only. Mr Khan and his government must reflect on the legacy they will leave behind for press freedom, and stop treating journalists as the enemy.

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Justice served

JUSTICE has finally been served in the high-profile murder nearly nine years ago of Perween Rahman, an ardent social activist who was unafraid to take on the powerful in defence of the weak. On Friday, an anti-terrorism court in Karachi sentenced four accused to two life terms each while awarding the fifth seven years behind bars. An architect and urban planner, and director of the world-renowned Orangi Pilot Project, Ms Rahman was shot dead in the metropolis on March 13, 2013, while going home from work. Even for a city inured to violence, where TTP militants were gaining an increasing foothold, it was a shocking crime. Why would anyone choose to target a woman who for three decades had employed her expertise not for personal advancement, but towards improving the quality of life for impoverished households in Orangi? However, those close to

the low-key Ms Rahman knew that her pursuit of social justice in matters of land and water rights had earned her some implacable enemies, particularly those with high stakes in the city's real estate.

The primary motive for the crime is believed to be Ms Rahman having resisted one of the five men convicted on Friday from illegally occupying land belonging to the OPP; a conspiracy was then hatched to eliminate her. But the investigation into the killing was deliberately botched, with law enforcement seemingly keen to draw a line under it no matter how implausible its claims, simply to silence the public uproar. Senior police command announced less than 24 hours after the incident that the gunman had been killed in an encounter; reports subsequently emerged showing how evidence had been destroyed and the case spoiled. The slain activist's family and friends, however, were determined to bring the killers to book. Their years-long ordeal is a lesson in perseverance that the Supreme Court, moved by Ms Rahman's selfless devotion to her less fortunate fellow citizens and the brutal way in which her life had been cut short, fully supported. Over the years, no less than three JITs were ordered to investigate the assassination.

The culpability of the land mafia emerged as a compelling factor and helped achieve the conviction of the accused. Fierce contestation over Karachi's precious real estate has been recognised as a root cause of urban violence that has flared up in the city from time to time. The second JIT report pointed out: "...often murders that were declared as being politically motivated or acts of terrorism, were in actual fact land disputes that were made to look like political killings to cover up the real facts." It described the accused as "small-time gangsters" typical of those "used as foot soldiers by the land mafia". Unfortunately, Ms Rahman paid the ultimate price in an unequal contest where power trumps all. At least this time, there has been some accountability.

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Omicron threat

WITH cases of the Omicron variant spreading at "lightning speed" in Europe, according to the French prime minister, the detection of the strain in Pakistan — the second such case here — in a passenger arriving from the UK should result in further tightening of Covid-related SOPs and travelling restrictions. Last week,

the WHO warned that the Omicron variant was spreading faster than other coronavirus strains. The WHO chief regretted that Omicron was still considered a mild variant, and said that even if the infection it caused was less severe, the sheer volume of cases due to increased transmissibility could once more overburden health systems. The concern was reflected in the French PM's warning of a fifth wave of Covid-19. France announced restrictions on New Year celebrations and has banned travellers' entry from outside the EU including the UK where Omicron cases have increased alarmingly with new cases approaching 100,000. Meanwhile, a study released by Imperial College London stated that the risk of reinfection by Omicron was five times higher than the Delta variant; "no evidence" was found of it causing milder infections than Delta, contradicting earlier reports.

Omicron was first reported from southern Africa and has spread to 89 countries. The variant probably exists in other countries as well but has not been reported yet. Given the situation, Pakistan has good reason to be alarmed. So far, the government has done well to place restrictions on travellers from countries where a large number of cases are being reported. However, these restrictions will only be useful if they are strictly implemented by all tiers of government and the aviation agencies. Reports of airport officials not following Covid-19 SOPs for arriving passengers, including from the UK, should be looked into and the aviation staff should be instructed to take every precaution and screen incoming travellers. So far, Pakistan has remained unscathed from the larger damage wrought by the variant and the government must do all it can to keep things that way.

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Gurgaon controversy

THE unfortunate reality of India today is that Hindu extremists — egged on by their ideological fellow travellers in government — are constantly coming up with new ruses to make life for the country's Muslim minority increasingly difficult. The latest controversy has emerged from the Delhi suburb of Gurgaon, where hardliners belonging to the Sangh Parivar have been protesting over Muslims offering Friday prayers outdoors.

For several months now, zealots have been showing up to prayers and heckling worshippers, accusing them of taking part in 'land jihad'. The fact is that there are not enough mosques in the area, which has left local Muslims with no option but to hold prayers in vacant lots, particularly on Fridays when congregations are larger than usual.

However, behind the façade of adhering to civic codes lurks the monster of bigotry. The problem in BJP-ruled India is not where Muslims hold prayers. The 'problem' seems to be the community itself, as Hindu extremists want to wipe out all traces of Muslim culture and practices from the country. What is even more disturbing is that officialdom is standing by the fundamentalists; the chief minister of Haryana, where Gurgaon is located, has said namaz in open places "will not be tolerated".

Of course, opposition to Muslim religious and cultural practices seems to be the natural choice for a ruling party whose ideological comrades proudly demolished the Babri Masjid. In fact, that dark day served as a harbinger for India's Muslims regarding what was to come; the kar sevaks who helped destroy the Mughal-era mosque in Ayodhya have now captured power in New Delhi. Ever since Narendra Modi took power, life has become more and more difficult for India's Muslims.

From facing accusations of 'love jihad' and violent vigilante attacks due to suspected cow slaughter to having to prove their antecedents in order to save their citizenship, Muslims in India face a systematic wave of discrimination and disenfranchisement. The brutal treatment of Kashmiris in the occupied region is another story altogether. Therefore, the confrontation over prayers in Gurgaon is an additional link in this disturbing chain. If the Indian state is serious about preserving its so-called secularism, it needs to ensure Muslims are allowed to practise their religion freely without any threat from violent elements. If not, the assumption that India's secular order has been replaced by a Hindutva raj will only be proven true.

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No quick fix

MORE than once this season, Lahore has had the dubious distinction of topping the daily ranking of the city with the worst air pollution compared to other cities across the globe, as indicated by the environment think tank IQAir. Beating Shanghai and New Delhi, both of which are far larger in terms of population and geographical spread, is no mean feat. But, as has been the case for successive years during which the problem has exponentially been growing, this has left the authorities seemingly scrambling to offer defences. On Thursday, the Punjab IGP announced that over the year, his force had issued tickets to 40,618 “smoke-emitting vehicles” and detained 4,508 “others” in a province-wide crackdown to fight the problem. But in that very statement lies the rub: given that the stakeholders that have by now become involved range from the Lahore High Court to political party activists, the environment lobby, the media, and private citizens, there is no reason to believe that the umbrella accusation of ‘smoke-emitting’ does not enclose in its fold myriad other violations.

This in itself demonstrates the problem with the authorities’ efforts to fight smog in Lahore, an issue that first began to manifest itself before the turn of the millennium. Sporadic efforts are made now and then, such as in late November when the Punjab police registered cases against and imposed heavy fines on various industrial units under the anti-smog operation. But over two decades, no cohesive policy has emerged to counter what every citizen knows they will experience in winter. Each time, the authorities appear to be taken by surprise. Such patchy measures are doing nothing towards the resolution of a crisis growing in intensity. Cleaning up the air has to be a sustained, well-directed, and over-the-years effort. There is little that Pakistan can do about pollution-carrying winds coming from across the border. But at the very least it can make a sustained effort at getting its own house in some sort of order.

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Restoring sacked workers

IN a major decision that has impacted hundreds of families, the Supreme Court has reinstated sacked government employees who had lost their jobs in light of

another SC decision in August. There were scenes of jubilation outside the court premises when the gathered people heard that a five-member bench, with a 4-1 majority, had reinstated them, though with some caveats. The details of the issue date back to the 1990s when the then PPP government had employed many thousands of people in various government departments and organisations. However, they were let go after the PPP left office. The matter was referred to the courts and it lingered there till the PPP returned to power and in 2010 promulgated the Sacked Employees (Reinstatement) Act, 2010, as a result of which all these people were once again back in their jobs. However, some petitioners went to court again and finally the SC issued a verdict on Aug 17 this year when Justice Mushir Alam declared as illegal the SERA and all the employees who had been reinstated as a result of that act were once again rendered jobless.

The government as well as many of these people had filed a review petition in the SC on the Aug 17 judgement. Friday's SC judgement did not entertain the review petition which meant that the original decision of Aug 17 remained in force. However, the bench invoked the original jurisdiction under Article 184(3) of the Constitution read with Article 187 and restored the sacked employees. In this way the SC used its constitutional powers to provide justice to the people who had lost their jobs without overturning its earlier judgement.

While this may be good news for thousands of people who now find themselves gainfully employed again, it is also a reminder that doling out government jobs as an act of political patronage comes at a heavy cost. The PPP had indulged in such acts and had defended it as a noble thing without realising that jobs are not freebies but entail a steep economic cost to the nation. In addition, government jobs are not meant to be distributed as political gifts to supporters. They must be based on merit because the government can perform well only if it employs the right people for the right jobs. When this basic principle is not followed, the citizen suffers at the end. Given the precarious state of the economy, and the bloated size of the government, it is all the more important that governments pay special attention to the issue of hiring. The SC judgement has eased the suffering of those thousands who have been agonising over their fates for more than a decade, but it should be a wake-up call for all political parties as they compete for power.

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Karachi explosion

IN Karachi, the sad truth is that decades of haphazard growth and flouting of civic codes have created death traps across this vast, unwieldy city. Saturday's blast in the Shershah area has once again illustrated this painful reality. At the time of writing, 17 people had been confirmed dead in the tragedy.

While investigation is underway to determine the exact cause of the explosion under the building built atop a sewerage drain, the bomb disposal squad has said leakage of sewer gases may have been responsible for the blast. The tragic fact is that in Karachi, it doesn't need an act of terrorism to cause mass casualties; decades of civic neglect and official apathy have created a disfigured city where hazards are always lurking around the corner. The deadly results of this negligence manifest themselves often enough.

Buildings erected on drains, encroachments blocking the natural flow of rainwater and structures built without regard to safety features or fire hazards result in frequent tragedies in the metropolis, with the authorities promising to get tough after every incident, but in reality doing little to change the situation on the ground.

The fact is that 'fixing' Karachi is a gargantuan task, as the city has been left to its own devices by successive federal and provincial governments. Structures built on drains or posing other safety hazards are in their hundreds, if not thousands.

A few months ago, a portion of the KMC's Jubilee Market caved in, while there have been a number of deadly building collapses in the recent past. So the million-dollar question is: where does one begin to address decades of civic neglect in the metropolis? Perhaps there needs to be a thorough survey involving independent experts along with officials conducted to spot major hazards in the city, such as dangerous buildings or structures built on drains and other infrastructural hazards.

Thereafter, a rational plan needs to be followed whereby structures which pose a threat to human lives are brought down. In the long run, an elected, honest and professional civic administration is needed in the megacity that brooks no corruption, and puts the emphasis on safety and enforcement of civic codes. And

while the Sindh government has passed an ordinance to regularise buildings, such legal instruments should in no way be allowed to green-light dangerous construction so that tragedies such as the Shershah episode are not repeated.

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Dysfunctional HEC

IN many ways, the crisis within the Higher Education Commission reflects what is wrong with higher education itself in the country. If the key financial post of the higher education regulatory body, which has a budget in excess of Rs100bn, is being run on an ad hoc basis, how can one hope for improvement in the administrative and academic affairs of Pakistan's public sector universities, many of which have been similarly functioning without a permanent head ie vice chancellor for several years? According to a news report, the position of a permanent executive director (responsible for looking after HEC's financial affairs) has not been filled for the past three years. Despite the advertisement of the post four times in the past three years and the submissions of some 50 applications, no appointment has been made. That is not all that plagues the HEC's administration and functioning. Since the controversial removal of the HEC chairman by the government in March — through an ordinance issued to reduce his secured tenure to two years — the position has remained vacant. However, a new appointment cannot be made on account of a court order following the filing of a case by the ousted chairman against his arbitrary dismissal. In addition to this, other posts related to IT, operations and academics have also been vacant at the HEC.

This chaotic situation raises serious questions about the capabilities of a government-mandated body with a multibillion-rupee budget for overseeing the award of research grants, monitoring the quality of scholarship produced, collaborating with international bodies, and revising curricula in higher educational institutes while providing the latter support. If the government cannot effectively resolve the persisting crisis at the institute that oversees higher education in the country, how can the HEC spearhead decision-making for the overall improvement of higher education institutes which are already in a shambolic state? Unfortunately, by not addressing the problem with the urgency

it deserves, the authorities have demonstrated their disdain for the future of thousands of students.

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Aid for Afghanistan

THE OIC meeting in Islamabad has produced some results but not as much as was hoped. The 57-member body held an extraordinary session of foreign ministers to exclusively discuss ways and means to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Afghanistan.

At the end of the meeting, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and the OIC secretary general Hissein Brahim Taha announced that the body had agreed to establish a Humanitarian Trust Fund and Food Security Programme to deal with the crisis in Afghanistan. The Fund will be managed by the Islamic Development Bank and will be made operational by March of next year.

However, beyond these two steps, nothing much else appears to be the outcome of the mega event. There were some expectations that if nothing else, the member countries would make financial pledges for Afghanistan. This has not happened except Saudi Arabia's announcing that it would give \$265m for Afghanistan and Pakistan has already said earlier that it would donate \$30m.

The OIC has over the years built up a reputation that has not inspired too much confidence. Its words usually speak louder than its actions and something similar appears to have happened at this latest meeting in Islamabad. It is unfortunate that the people of Afghanistan would have to brave the worst winter months on their own and wait till at least March to see the OIC doing anything substantive. This means that if the humanitarian crisis has to be averted, other multilateral organisations like the UN, and influential countries, especially the United States, will need to step up and save Afghanistan from this crisis.

The OIC meeting, however, was good on optics. Pakistan has done well to organise the high-profile event and it goes to the credit of Foreign Minister Qureshi and the Foreign Office for ensuring very strong participation not just from the member states but also from the P5 countries and other relevant multilateral organisations. The event has made headlines and has focused attention on the plight of the people of Afghanistan.

The conference also provided Pakistan a good platform to highlight its own efforts in Afghanistan and the proactive diplomacy that it has been pursuing which led to the Doha talks and then later also after the Taliban takeover of Kabul on Aug 15. Pakistan has also done well to organise Afghanistan's neighbours and other regional countries to stay engaged in a bid to stabilise the situation so that Afghanistan does not plunge back into chaos and violence.

Even though the OIC meeting has not produced anything immediate and substantive, it is a good beginning to leverage the power of the Muslim nations to push for greater international engagement with Afghanistan and coax other important countries to think beyond their antipathy to the Taliban and help the people of Afghanistan.

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Sugar reforms

THE sugar sector reforms suggested by a ministerial panel last week can be a major leap towards deregulation of the sweetener's trade. But, at the same time, the proposed reforms underscore the predicament of the Imran Khan administration. It wants the government to get out of the sector and yet it has been reluctant to recommend its complete withdrawal from the market. The ruling party's hesitancy is understandable given the political nature of the commodity with the involvement of millions of cane growers across Punjab and Sindh as well as influential political families straddling the party divide. The financial interests of the bureaucracy in continuing its hold over the sector is another obstacle towards complete deregulation of sugar trade in the country. The panel — the Sugar Sector Reform Committee — was formed by the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan in the wake of an extensive federal inquiry against the sugar factories and is supposed to look into different aspects of the commodity's trade following the 2019 winter shortages that led to a swift price hike. Most of the suggestions put forward by the committee after one and a half year of deliberations have been on the table for long and require a major shift in policy. But no government has dared to implement them for fear of a political backlash from the growers and factory owners.

For example, the proposal to end the support price for the sugar cane crop will not be liked by the big growers who have a strong presence in parliament.

Likewise, the suggested changes in the provincial laws to put an end to crop zoning to give growers the option to decide what to grow and what not to will be frowned upon by mill owners. The abolition of the Sugar Factories Establishment and Enlargement Act, 1966, to allow anyone to set up a sugar mill to break the cartel of the factory owners will also not sit well with the wealthy millers. These are all steps towards deregulation of the sector and the improvement of its governance. But the proposals to allow sugar import while controlling the export of surplus or imposition of fines on delays in crushing etc. show that the government is still not ready for a totally deregulated sector. Still, the panel's recommendations can be the first step towards reducing sugar price volatility and deregulating the market in the country.

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Nato-Russia tensions

WHILE the Sino-US confrontation has revived memories of the Cold War, the tense stand-off between Nato and Russia is an even stronger reminder of the decades-long conflict between the Western and Eastern blocs. Years after the fall of the Soviet Union, a resurgent Russia is seeking to reclaim the global position of the USSR as its successor state. This has put it on a collision course with the Western bloc, specifically Nato, the Cold War-era military combine led by the US; the latest flashpoint is the former Soviet republic of Ukraine. The Western side fears Russia is planning to invade Ukraine and claims it has amassed thousands of troops at the border; Moscow denies any such intentions. Ukraine was also a site of confrontation when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The key point is that Moscow does not want Nato to expand eastward. The Western military force has already given membership to former Soviet republics such as the Baltic states. Russia seems to be drawing the line with Ukraine, which the West wants to see in the Nato fold. Russia has issued a number of documents last week effectively asking the EU/Nato to stay away from its 'near abroad'.

Instead of sabre-rattling, Nato must promise Russia that it will respect its position. Russia must also assure the Western bloc that all territorial and security disputes will be resolved through dialogue. The fact is that the threat of escalation is very real. In a recent conversation, US President Joe Biden

threatened Russian President Vladimir Putin with “severe consequences” if Moscow invaded Ukraine, while a top Russian diplomat has said relations between his country and Nato had reached a “dangerous point”, and that military drills near the Russian border were “unacceptable”. Whether it is the Sino-US rivalry or the Russia-Nato spat, all sides must act to prevent a new Cold War. The West must not dictate terms to geopolitical rivals, while Russia and China should also restrain themselves. Ultimately, all sides must respect the red lines set by the other.

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Rude shock for PTI

RESULTS for the first phase of the local bodies’ elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are out and the outcome in 46 out of the 64 tehsils declared so far has sent shock waves across the country’s political landscape.

The PTI that ruled KP for nearly eight and half years has ended up getting a bloody nose from no less a rival than the JUI-F whose leadership was the butt of jokes and snide remarks by the ruling party. The religious party, which received a body blow at the hands of the PTI in the last two elections, much like many other political parties including the ANP, has made a surprise comeback bagging the chairmanship and mayorship in 16 sub-districts, with the PTI trailing with just 12 slots.

In fact, together the opposition parties — ANP, PML-N, Jamaat-i-Islami, PPP-P — clinched 31 seats. Add the seven independents, and the figure jumps to 38. This is a huge number and should be cause for serious concern for the PTI which until very recently could rightly boast of being the only party that was twice returned to power in the north-western province.

Not only this, the PTI also lost in areas and cities where it had single-handedly defeated all the major political parties. For instance, in Peshawar, the citadel of political power, where the PTI had won five national and 11 provincial assembly seats in the last general elections, the ruling party has ended up with just one tehsil. Many prominent figures in the current government, both federal as well as provincial, have lost their native tehsils.

Surely, the PTI will do some deep soul-searching in the weeks ahead, but it cannot deny the impact of its poor economic policies, the price hike and the power and gas outages that have hit the common man hard — something that many in government have acknowledged. This is probably the major factor responsible for the PTI defeat in the first round of the local bodies polls.

Nepotism and favouritism in the award of party tickets at the expense of diehard workers, lack of an organisational structure at the lower tier and a complacent leadership are some of the other factors contributing to the PTI's shock defeat in the hotly contested elections. The myth that the PTI is invincible has been broken and this should give some food for thought to the party leadership.

Like the PTI, the ANP too needs to look inward and probe its rather poor performance. The Pakhtun national party has been able to win only one seat from Peshawar and has lost all three seats in its birthplace and stronghold of Charsadda. With just six seats in hand, it hardly has any reason to rejoice. It needs to understand that it will have to reshape its narrative in order to enlist the support of an educated and social media-savvy youth in KP.

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PM on education

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's remarks about girls' education in tribal districts in Pakistan and Afghanistan have triggered a fiery debate with many criticising him for attempting to justify the Taliban viewpoint on women's education.

At the OIC meeting in Islamabad, Mr Khan made the unfortunate remarks as he earnestly beseeched the world — especially the US — to act fast and deliver financial aid to an Afghanistan firmly under Taliban rule and stressed that “human rights and women's rights are different in every society”. He went on to talk about Pakhtun culture and sensitivities regarding girls' education in predominantly Pakhtun districts, implying somehow that Pakhtuns were not in favour of women's education.

His statement was heavily criticised on social media, even prompting Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai to weigh in. Though she did not explicitly name Mr Khan, Ms Yousafzai, who nearly lost her life fighting against the TTP's ban on girls' education, said that scores of Pakhtun activists had lost their lives when

they raised their voice against the horrors perpetrated by militants, underscoring how so many were displaced or killed in their fight for girls' right to education. "We represent Pashtoons — not the Taliban," she said.

Mr Khan's viewpoint on girls' education is ill-informed. It is also puzzling that although he has often rightly drawn attention to Islamophobia, and wants the West to differentiate between radical and moderate Muslims, he has painted the Pakhtun people with the same broad brush, implying that all of them are opposed to women's rights — an attitude that is reflected in some Western states who tend to see the Muslim world in black and white terms.

These areas that Mr Khan is painting as backward or regressive are mostly underdeveloped, ignored by governments or deprived of investment. The reality is that many girls want to go to school, but a lack of infrastructure coupled with resistance from certain forces such as the ultra-conservative Taliban, prevent them from doing so.

The premier should know better than to co-opt a Taliban viewpoint and present it as a justification for what is simply a violation of the basic right to education. In fact, his stance that human rights and women's rights should somehow change depending on society is extremely damaging. When it comes to women's rights, there have been too many instances when Mr Khan has taken a position that is controversial. He must correct his approach and weigh his words in future.

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Industry's gas woes

BONA FIDE textile and clothing exporters have started suffering production losses as the row between the industry and energy ministry over the complete suspension of gas supplies for captive power continues. While the ministry's action may not leave as extensive an impact on the industry's overseas shipments during winter as is being maintained by APTMA, it has already compelled many exporters — especially vertically integrated units dependent on gas or on both electricity and gas to fully run their operations — to partially close down their production capacities. The ministry says it cannot provide expensive imported LNG for inefficient captive plants as it would be a waste and a burden on the national exchequer. It wants the industry to switch to grid power, which is

now easily available, to cut the government's losses on massive capacity payments to power producers. It also argues that the subsidised gas should be for exports alone and not for local sales since domestic gas reserves have depleted to a point where the government is unable to meet the growing demand without costly energy imports.

The industry, on its part, blames the ministry's failure to ensure sufficient LNG imports for winters. It says the factory owners are ready to pay a higher price of \$9/mmBtu against the previous tariff of \$6.5/mmBtu in view of the rising price of imported LNG and increasing shortfall in domestic gas production if the ministry ensures uninterrupted supplies as agreed by the two sides. Contrary to the government's assertion, it contends that the majority of textile producers have already installed the most efficient combined cycle technology to generate captive power, as well as produce steam and hot water for production. Moreover, they point out that several new exporting units do not have electricity connections because public-sector electricity distribution companies lack the infrastructure to give new connections or even enhance the existing load of old units that have expanded their production capacities in the last couple of years. Most importantly, exporters who have recently upgraded their textile technology require an uninterrupted, smooth power supply to avoid damage to their equipment and production losses owing to frequent fluctuations on the grid.

Prima facie, both sides have valid arguments. This gives hope that a middle ground can be found if the ministry and the industry associations agree to sit across the table to find a solution for maintaining the present export growth momentum. Indeed, it will require both sides to take a step back from their current positions. One solution could be that the ministry restores gas supplies to all exporters with efficient, combined cycle captive power plants, as well as to those units that are facing delays in new electricity connections or load enhancement. In return, the industry should agree to pay the new price and give up its demand for subsidised gas for domestic sales and inefficient captive power.

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Flawed wars

THE destructive US interventions and regime-change missions, particularly in the Muslim world, over the last few decades have long been criticised for turning functional states into failed ones. However, in the zeal to bring ‘democracy’ to these states and eliminate terrorists, the US campaigns have also resulted in high civilian death tolls, even as the world’s most powerful military machine has deployed highly sophisticated drones and precision bombs.

A thorough investigative report by The New York Times has revealed that the deaths of non-combatants in Syria and Iraq have been routine, and other than expressing regret, the US military has done little to stop the killing of innocent people, including women and children. One attack in northern Syria in 2016, which was supposed to target IS terrorists, ended up killing 120 villagers. In another such flawed operation, the US military thought it was targeting a car bomb in Mosul, Iraq. A family of four perished in the tragedy.

Many such examples have been cited by the NYT report, including the incident in August in which the US targeted a car in Kabul, killing 10 civilians. US military officials have said those responsible for the attack will not be punished. Pakistan has also experienced the destructive effects of the US drone war in its tribal belt. Meanwhile in Yemen, the US-supported Saudi-led air war has resulted in a large number of civilian casualties. When the Centcom spokesperson was approached for comment by the NYT, he said “mistakes do happen”, adding that the US military was working “diligently to avoid such harm”.

The fact is that whether it is boots on the ground, or drones and daisy cutters raining destruction from the sky, American military overreach has resulted in unacceptable deaths of innocent people. Unfortunately, there are no indications that the US intends to change course where such military operations are concerned. Rather than bringing stability to the world and countering militancy, such deadly military adventurism only helps fuel extremism and anti-American feelings around the globe.

When the US kills innocent people in the name of taking out terrorists, it will hardly win hearts and minds. Instead of playing the global policeman, the US needs to work with the international community and use more intelligent counterterrorism methods and abandon the regime-change mantra for good,

while those responsible for civilian deaths need to be punished, and the families of the victims compensated for their loss.

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Acquittal falsely obtained

THE trial of the accused in the Sahiwal incident never met the ends of justice. That fact was as clear as the broad daylight in which a couple, their teenaged daughter and a family friend were gunned down by CTD personnel on Jan 19, 2019, while travelling in a car on a highway in Punjab. However, all the six accused were acquitted in October that year after the witnesses resiled from their earlier statements.

On Tuesday, during a hearing of the Punjab government's appeal against the acquittal, a Lahore High Court judge berated the witnesses — including the complainant in the case — for giving false statements. The court issued notices to the complainant as well as to a Sahiwal district police officer who, as per one of the witnesses, had pressured him to change his testimony.

The Sahiwal incident embodies the very worst elements of the criminal justice system in the country. Immediately after it occurred, the police put out a story that the family friend had links with a terrorist outfit and that all four individuals had been killed in an encounter with CTD personnel when the latter tried to stop the car. However, the accounts of the slain couple's two surviving children, who were also in the vehicle when the bloodbath took place, and other witnesses revealed there was no encounter, but that the police had fired directly at the vehicle — no questions asked.

It is bad enough that law-enforcement personnel can be so ruthless as to mow down innocent people, including minors, and then blithely proceed to label it an encounter. That their colleagues can then proceed to intimidate witnesses in order to smooth the way for trigger-happy cops to go free is abhorrent. Sadly, for the police to threaten and torture individuals into giving statements that suit their purpose rather than the ends of justice has become part and parcel of thana culture in Pakistan. The court must not allow itself to be hoodwinked.

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More powers for FBR

THE government's move to seek additional punitive powers for tax collectors against retail businesses that are defying the FBR's efforts to monitor and document their real-time sales by linking point of sale machines with its online system is completely justified. A recent report says that the FBR has sought more powers for its officers through the proposed Supplementary Finance Bill, 2021, to instantly seal business premises in case of resistance. The success of this initiative is crucial to not only boosting government revenues by preventing massive tax theft by the retail sector but also to documenting the entire supply chain. The enhancement in punitive powers of the tax officers is needed as the threat of penalties and disconnection of utility services has failed to enforce compliance by retailers, who have opposed similar moves in the past to bring them into the tax net. So far, the FBR has succeeded in registering only 2,650 retailers and digitally integrating just 2,500 of them with its system. The number of POS machines integrated with the tax system until now is said to be 15,000. This compares with nearly 65,000 machines being operated by banks across the country. The government hopes to plug all the machines into the FBR system during the current fiscal year. It remains to be seen whether it can.

Pakistan's low tax collection is primarily due to weak tax compliance and administration, as well as generous exemptions given to different segments of the economy. The extremely narrow tax base and a weak tax machinery means that the country is still struggling to raise its tax-to-GDP ratio of around 10pc, one of the lowest in the world, to meet its revenue needs. With the IMF breathing down their neck to achieve primary balance at the close of the current fiscal, the authorities are now realising the urgency of increasing tax collection by widening the net to under-taxed and untaxed sectors. Hence, the impetus to document the retail sector, which had largely remained outside the net.

While it is important to enhance tax collectors' punitive powers to increase tax compliance, the government should also undertake initiatives for developing and improving the capacity of FBR personnel and minimise their contact with taxpayers through the use of technology to put a stop to the widespread abuse of their discretionary powers for personal financial gain. No matter how misplaced or weak this argument may seem, the fact remains that a large number of individuals and small businesses resist becoming a part of the country's tax

system because of the misuse of authority by FBR officials, many of whom allegedly harass and extort money from the taxpayers. Thus, tax reforms should not be confined to only expanding the tax base or enhancing officials' powers; they must extend to officials' accountability in order to protect taxpayers from the abuse of powers and encourage tax compliance.

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Report on terrorism

HE threat posed to the region by violent extremist outfits has only grown more complex since the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government next door. Indications of what may lie ahead if Pakistan and Afghanistan do not act soon to counter it can be gleaned from the latest US State Department report on terrorism.

About the militant Islamic State group's Khorasan chapter, the report says: "The group is based in Afghanistan, conducts operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is composed primarily of former members of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan." Its fighters are estimated to number around 1,000.

The TTP, according to the report, boasts between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters and draws "ideological guidance" from Al Qaeda elements which partly rely on TTP for safe havens along the Pak-Afghan border. It is, as the document notes, a convenient arrangement that gives the Pakistani militant outfit "access to both Al Qaeda's global terrorist network and its members' operational expertise".

Militants who espouse violent extremist ideologies do not operate in silos. Even IS and Al Qaeda, each of whom have tried to develop their 'brand' over the years, have fighters that maintain links with the other group. Many have also moved back and forth, depending on developments on the ground; IS's 'caliphate' was a particularly attractive recruitment tool.

Closer to home, the Afghan Taliban, despite seeking recognition from the world as their country's legitimate government, have refused to take any action against the TTP which hosted them in Pakistan's border areas while the Taliban leaders were on the run from US and Afghan military forces. Such a stance flies in the face of their commitment to the international community to prevent militant groups from using Afghanistan as a launching pad for transnational attacks.

While IS has a smaller number of fighters, they have carried out some of the most devastating attacks in the region; their sectarian agenda makes them doubly lethal. The US of course has a major stake in whether, after its unceremonious exit from the war-ravaged country, terrorist outfits will find the space to regroup and again pose a threat to its interests. There are many legitimate reasons to take issue with that country's conduct in the 'war on terror', but the resurgence of militancy should be a common concern that pushes Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US to formulate a joint strategy against it.

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Kashmiri activist's arrest

A CALL by UN rights experts to immediately release a detained Kashmiri activist has once again underscored the Indian government's oppressive and tyrannical policy in the occupied territory. Khurram Parvez's only 'crime' is that he reported serious human rights violations in India-held Kashmir, raised his voice against enforced disappearances and unlawful killings and shared this information with the UN. India's counterterrorism agency arrested him last month under a draconian antiterror law, a move which triggered outrage among rights groups across the world. Mr Parvez's criticism of the Indian regime is scathing, and is documented meticulously to bring to light the ongoing human rights abuses in the occupied territory whose residents have lived in fear since Prime Minister Narendra Modi revoked its special status. This was not the first time Mr Parvez was arrested. He was also detained in 2016 and barred from flying to a UN Human Rights Council event on the fallacious pretext that he was a 'threat' to public safety.

After his latest detention, the UN Human Rights Council has rightly raised concerns about "a new incident of retaliation for his legitimate activities as a human rights defender and because he has spoken out about violations". The body also criticised the law under which Mr Parvez is being held — legislation that was passed the same year Mr Modi revoked Kashmir's special status — as it can designate anyone as a terrorist without establishing the person's link with a banned group. The arrest of Mr Parvez and the ad hoc application of this law by Indian authorities against activists is a blatant display of high-handedness by the administration. Time and again, especially in the matter of documenting the

horrors faced by Kashmiri Muslims, the Indian government has shown that it is not ready to tolerate any individual who holds up a mirror to the grim reality. Rights groups must continue to raise their voice against India's excesses and demand that human rights defenders not be punished by forces that pay no heed to the right to freedom of speech.

Booster shots

IN a welcome move, Pakistani authorities have decided to extend the Covid-19 vaccine booster to all adults of 30 years and above. According to a recent NCOC decision, those in this category will be able to get free booster shots of their choice from Jan 1. Earlier, only people above 50 or those with compromised immunity could receive booster jabs of the vaccine they had been immunised with. But as several people couldn't travel easily because a number of countries let in only those who had been administered vaccines approved by them, the government here decided to allow people to receive booster jabs of their choice, irrespective of the vaccine they were initially administered. At a time when the Omicron variant is spearheading a potential fifth wave of infections in Europe, the decision taken by Pakistan will also provide some degree of protection to people, including those who had already been inoculated but who may once again be vulnerable to the virus as the efficacy of vaccines administered months ago tapers off. In fact, the Omicron variant is said to be highly transmissible even in people who have been vaccinated.

It is true that the WHO says the Omicron variant is a consequence of vaccine inequality, and has warned that "no country can boost its way out of the pandemic". It says that booster shots might prolong the pandemic as developed nations divert vaccine supplies away from the countries that need them most. This statement came in response to the recently announced booster programmes in the US and Israel. However, Pakistan's case appears to be quite different. While it can hardly be ranked among those who hoard vaccines, it has managed to inoculate millions, the vaccine hesitancy in the population notwithstanding. The NCOC's diligent efforts have been paying off with over 63m fully vaccinated and more than 90m having received a single dose. It must continue with its efforts to speed up regular Covid-19 vaccination alongside administering booster shots.

Opposition's elation

THE trouncing of the PTI in the first phase of local government elections has come as a significant blow to the ruling party. As a result of the setback, the prime minister is now keenly focused on avoiding an upset in the upcoming Punjab polls, and is said to be personally overseeing preparations.

The JUI-F emerged as the big winner in the KP polls, bagging 17 out of 47 tehsil councils and leaving the PTI with 12. The development has created a wave of optimism in opposition ranks at a time when the so-called anti-government drive exists only in name. Months of protests against the government by the PDM and vows to resign from the assemblies, plus declarations of long marches, have hardly dented the PTI's morale. But since the LG polls this week, the opposition leaders are ecstatic.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman has boasted that his JUI-F is the largest political force in the province; Asif Ali Zardari has hinted that those devising 'minus-one formulae' are asking for help, though he said no talks would be held until the PTI is ousted. And Shehbaz Sharif has dubbed the KP polls as the "beginning of the end of an experiment that has cost the nation dearly". Though they are riding on the recent wave of the JUI-F's success and PTI's defeat in the KP polls, the reality is that the ruling party's losses have more to do with its own failings than any intelligent strategy of the opposition.

Uncontrolled inflation, a poor economic performance, unemployment, and water and gas shortages have plagued the PTI in both the long and the short term, cementing the impression that the party is far from the days of its peak confidence in the aftermath of the 2018 polls. The fiasco in KP was due to both low party morale and the selection of the wrong candidates as admitted by the PM himself. Furthermore, it is said that it was a PTI vs PTI showdown, betraying that the KP poll strategy itself was in disarray.

Though the opposition has obviously benefited from this lack of planning and low morale, their own strategies and internal wrangling give little hope for something impactful to come next. The PTI's infighting has caused serious damage, but the PDM's quarrelling with the PPP and the PML-N's leadership crisis still persist.

It is perhaps too soon for the opposition to rejoice, even as the ruling party is smarting from its recent defeat. Overcoming the political friction between opposition parties and finding a lasting solution to the Maryam Nawaz vs Shehbaz Sharif crisis is no mean feat. The PTI may be fumbling due to its own mistakes, but the truth is that the opposition parties remain mired in problems of their own making. Unless they get their act together, their current elation will fizzle out as quickly as did the ‘power show’ of the PDM.

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Funding review

THE government on Thursday said the IMF executive board will take up the sixth review of its suspended \$6bn funding programme for approval on Jan 12. That means the country can expect the resumption of funding latest by the end of next month, followed by the immediate transfer of the two pending tranches of \$1bn to the State Bank. Ideally, the announcement should have revitalised the market and ended uncertainty about future government policies. But it has not. The markets are apparently more focused on the government’s ability to get the National Assembly’s approval for the supplementary finance bill, 2021, and controversial changes in the State Bank Act, two of the five prior actions Islamabad has agreed to before the IMF’s executive board revives its funding programme.

A report early this week had revealed that the federal cabinet had deferred approval of both the supplementary finance bill and the suggested changes in the SBP law because of political reasons. It has now transpired that there are strong differences of opinion within the PTI over new tax measures being introduced through the finance bill in the wake of the party’s battering in the first phase of local government elections in KP where voters showed their frustration with the PTI for not curbing the rising cost of living. Many in the party believe that putting greater financial burden on the people through an increase in taxes could be suicidal in terms of future elections. The party’s allies are also reluctant to support the inflationary measures proposed in the bill for fear of a political backlash in Punjab and elsewhere. As far as the bill — which will free the central bank from the influence of fiscal authorities and politicians on matters concerning the exchange rate and monetary policy — is concerned, the security

establishment is believed to be wary of unfettered autonomy for the bank and its management. It goes without saying that the opposition has already pledged to resist the passage of the laws. So in such circumstances, it is foolish to expect that a mere announcement of the IMF board meeting for considering Pakistan's request on a particular date will end economic uncertainty stemming from the deteriorating current account deficit, depleting foreign exchange reserves and galloping inflation. The markets need much more than that: a clear policy direction for the economy. More importantly, they want to know if the government has what it takes to make tough decisions.

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Stinking seas

THE inability of Karachi — read: successive provincial governments or municipal bodies — to clean up its own effluent has reached legendary proportions. The problem lies not only with the thousands of small-scale industrial units that, because of lack of civic oversight or mitigating arrangements such as treatment plants, continue to discharge raw effluent into the sea. A very large part of the problem also comes from the upscale and increasingly high-rise residential localities in the posh areas along the coast. These too have for years been discharging raw sewage directly into the ocean. The impunity with which the builders of these astronomically priced estates have failed to make proper waste arrangements — again fuelled by the lack of civic oversight or any accountability — without even a hint of *mea culpa* by the 'educated', elite owners of these plots is astounding. By the Sindh administration's own estimate several years ago, at least 8,000 tons of solid waste are either dumped or end up in the Karachi harbour every single day, in addition to a daily minimum inflow of 350 gallons of raw sewage or untreated industrial waste. As far as the civic administration is concerned, Karachi has a vast, open drain right there to be abused, thus removing the burden from the authorities' shoulders.

But last week, the Cantonment Board Clifton and Defence Housing Authority earned the ire of the Sindh High Court for their failure to file compliance reports over the release of sewage and industrial waste into the ocean. The case extends back to 2017, when the WWF-P and other NGOs presented a petition before the court. On Tuesday, the DHA-CBC deadline was extended to Feb 10

after which, the bench warned, an “appropriate” order would be passed against delinquent officers. That officers from these authorities were not even present in court says a lot about the immunity that they are believed to enjoy. It is to be vastly hoped that the judicial intervention will, eventually, prompt a change of direction.

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Climate of bigotry

IT is a conversation that must take place if extremism is not to consume Pakistani society from within, but is the country’s leadership prepared to engage in it? An honest appraisal of how we have arrived at a point where even a non-Muslim foreigner can be lynched on an accusation of blasphemy, requires a willingness to acknowledge a monumental failure of both policy and moral courage.

On Friday, PTI leader Dr Babar Awan tabled a resolution in the National Assembly for holding a debate on the Sialkot tragedy in which Sri Lankan national Priyantha Kumara was beaten to death by a mob for allegedly committing blasphemy. He was of the view that the penal system needed to be improved so that those guilty of violent crimes could not take advantage of loopholes or flaws in the system to escape punishment. In the Senate the same day, and with reference to Mr Kumara’s slaying, the government and the opposition also discussed the need to revamp the criminal justice system.

However, extremism in the country has gone well beyond a law and order problem. The poison of divisive rhetoric has percolated into the warp and weft of society. Its triumphalist mindset manifests itself in myriad ways, some of them seemingly innocuous, while others are more overt. But they all add up to an environment where matters of faith can provide a spark for a conflagration that does not spare even the mentally handicapped.

Less than a week before Mr Kumara’s murder, between 4,000-5,000 people attacked a police station in Charsadda, KP, demanding that the cops hand over a mentally unstable man taken into protective custody when he was accused of committing blasphemy. When Asiya Bibi was acquitted of the crime by the Supreme Court after having spent eight years on death row, riots led by the

Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan broke out across the country in protest against the verdict.

The state is entirely to blame. It deliberately steered society onto a right-wing trajectory for its own ends, turned a blind eye to those that incited violence against fellow Pakistanis, and extended kid glove treatment to individuals who acted on extremist beliefs. Even now, eight years after the APS Peshawar massacre led to the National Action Plan being devised to counter violent extremism, but which was hardly acted upon, the government is engaged in talks with the TTP, the very group that perpetrated that atrocity.

Now and then, banned groups surface to hold press conferences/rallies against women's rights, etc; hundreds of individuals affiliated with proscribed extremist groups stood as candidates in the 2018 election. Politicians of all shades, including otherwise progressive ones, have used accusations of blasphemy to intimidate rivals — the ultimate trump card in a reactionary society. Extremism has been mainstreamed and normalised. Until this mindset changes, there will inevitably be more Priyantha Kumaras.

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PTI reorganisation

PRIME Minister Imran Khan's decision to dissolve his party's organisational structure across the country after its poor showing in the first phase of LG elections in its stronghold of KP, as well as new nominations for the central and provincial offices, has not gone down well with the PTI rank and file. The workers have already started to question the wisdom of combining government and party offices in the same persons. The decision shows that Mr Khan believes that the wrong selection of candidates and intraparty disputes were responsible for the PTI's defeat in its stronghold where it had created history by becoming the first political party ever to have won a second consecutive term back in 2018. Therefore, the powers of the local party organisations to award tickets for local elections have also been curtailed and centralised in the core committee. The actions betray a sense of panic in the party leadership with LG polls in Punjab expected to be held in spring. A decision made in haste or in panic is a sign of poor politics, and could trigger internecine strife within the party.

While local disputes between different party groups at the local level and the wrong selection of candidates must have played a role in the PTI's defeat in KP, these were not the only or even the main factors. Poor management of the economy and the failure to control inflation are perhaps the biggest reason for angry voters in KP to reject the ruling party in its stronghold. A majority of provincial PTI leaders have admitted as much. The Punjab government had until now been reluctant to hold local polls in the province for the same reason. Recent public opinion surveys, like the one conducted by Transparency International Pakistan, have revealed that most of the respondents — over 90pc — think that inflation has been the highest under the PTI compared to the tenures of the opposition PML-N and PPP. Public ire against the government over inflation has been boiling for the last several months as low-middle-income households struggle to cope with the rising cost of living. The government cannot absolve itself of the responsibility by blaming global inflation for surging domestic prices. No change in party organisation will bring frustrated voters back into the PTI fold unless the rulers improve their economic performance and make life easier for millions of people suffering on account of poor governance.

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Corporal punishment

IT is deplorable that the practice of disciplining the young in the country should be guided by antiquated notions of physical abuse — both at home and in schools. In this context, the instructions of the Federal Directorate of Education to school managements in the federal capital to acquaint their staff with the provisos of a landmark law banning corporal punishment in educational institutes are very welcome. The law was passed earlier in the year and makes all manner of physical abuse punishable. The letter, issued to 423 schools across the federal capital, instructs the schools to ensure strict compliance with the anti-corporal punishment law that was recently signed by the president, and calls for, among other penalties, the termination of the services or demotion of teachers indulging in this reprehensible practice. But is this enough to ensure that students are never beaten and are given the space, free from the fear of the rod, to grow into confident young adults? Will softer ways of ensuring that the rules are followed be pursued? There is, unfortunately, no certainty on that count. Many good laws exist in the country but are not enforced as they should be. For

instance, Sindh, whose assembly has passed several progressive laws, is the only province with an anti-corporal punishment law. However, a number of loopholes prevent it from being effective.

Nevertheless, such laws indicate at least a recognition of the problem by the higher authorities and one hopes that schools will be compelled to invest in teacher training that imparts useful lessons in positive interactions with students. Though the recent law and the authorities' directives are limited in their application to Islamabad, they nonetheless serve as a blueprint for most of the provinces to stop corporal punishment — which has even led to fatalities in some cases — in schools in their respective jurisdictions. Perhaps alongside the law there can be a greater effort to educate the public on how the cycle of violence is continued by those who are beaten as children.

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Flight of the dollar

THE Pakistani rupee is expected to end a turbulent year on a depressing note as one of the world's worst-performing currencies. The rupee has declined by almost 12pc since the start of the year and more than 17pc after having bottomed out to 152.50 to a dollar in mid-May as the country hit balance-of-payment troubles that always follow its 'growth spurts'. The year 2021 began with the government boasting about a quicker economic recovery in the midst of the pandemic, and saw the rulers aiming for rapid economic growth to pacify a public hit by soaring inflation, shrinking incomes and rising unemployment. However, by the end of the year they had to once again turn to the IMF to put the economy into stabilisation mode. The quick regime change in Kabul last summer also intensified the pressure on the external sector due to the increased outflow of dollars to war-torn Afghanistan as the world turned away from the new Taliban rulers.

Although the State Bank has taken numerous measures to stabilise the rupee and the FIA is continuously cracking down on hoarders and smugglers to restrict the outflow of the American currency and ease its demand, the flight of the dollar continues. A senior FIA official admitted as much to this paper recently. While the authorities' actions are necessary to stop the illegal cross-border currency transfer, especially given Pakistan's troubles with the FATF, the task force with

the mandate to combat money laundering and terrorism financing, the pressure on the home currency cannot be eased and the dollar's flight cannot be checked without improving the country's economic fundamentals.

The interbank market data for the last one week shows that the rapid decline in the value of the rupee has eased and some semblance of stability in the exchange rate is returning. But for how long? With the current account deficit growing to more than \$7bn or 5.3pc of GDP from July to November, against the State Bank's revised projection of 4pc for the entire year, and the monthly headline inflation numbers hovering in double digits, it is naïve to expect the rupee to strengthen in the immediate term. This is so despite the recent statements of Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin that the home currency is overvalued by around 8pc or more. The markets have their own way of reacting to economic developments. Even though the rupee gained some lost ground after Riyadh announced a \$4.2bn assistance package for Islamabad towards the end of October, the sentiment didn't last long since the economic fundamentals were weak. Many expect the market to stabilise further once the IMF programme resumes next month and the dollars start flowing in. That still will be a short-term respite unless followed by structural reforms to put the country on a sustainable export-led growth path and lower price inflation.

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IHK 'encounters'

BRUTAL tales of deadly so-called encounters keep coming out of held Kashmir, as Indian forces continue to mow down innocent people in the occupied region by dubbing them 'militants'.

In the latest such outrage, reported by Indian media, six Kashmiri youths have been killed in a number of 'encounters' over the last few days in the south of the region. Some of the victims were merely teenagers.

While condemning the extrajudicial killings in clear terms, the Foreign Office pointed out that at least "18 Kashmiris have been martyred by Indian occupation forces in December so far". It may also be possible that the actual, unreported numbers of such atrocities are much higher.

Meanwhile, India's dubious activities in the disputed region have attracted opprobrium from various quarters abroad. Last week, at least 28 MPs in the British House of Commons wrote to the Indian High Commission in the UK calling for a response to reports of extrajudicial killings. The British lawmakers highlighted the fact that most of the victims of such killings are "normal citizens", while condemning the incarceration of Kashmiri rights activist Khurram Parvez.

The MPs also noted that over 2,500 innocent people had been detained by Indian forces over the last two years. Other neutral watchdogs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also documented abuses perpetrated on civilians by the Indian state in held Kashmir.

The unfortunate fact is that held Kashmir has been turned into a penitentiary by Indian forces. Anyone who dares resist India's military machine is dubbed a terrorist and is tortured or killed. New Delhi has been using a combination of black laws and extrajudicial methods to smother the Kashmiris. However, the brave people of the held region have continued to resist India's brutality and remain unbroken in their quest for freedom and dignity.

Yet while some in the international community do speak up for the beleaguered Kashmiris, many of the self-professed champions of human rights remain oddly silent in the face of Indian brutality in Kashmir. This hypocrisy must end and the international community must let India know that the fundamental rights of the Kashmiris cannot be ignored. Pakistan has for decades been pleading the Kashmiris' case, but unless India's powerful foreign friends call it out for its abuses in Kashmir, it is unlikely New Delhi will change its ways. It is time that the Kashmiris' endless nightmare came to an end.

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Missing prison reform

THE Islamabad High Court's comments that the country's prisons have turned into "epicentres of crime, corruption and corrupt practices" are hardly surprising. While hearing a case about the maltreatment of prisoners in jails on Monday, the IHC chief justice remarked that "elite capture" also seemed to prevail in prisons as those with power exploited the system, aided by the prison authorities, while the basic rights of vulnerable prisoners were continuously being infringed upon.

This description of Pakistan's prisons could serve as an indictment of the country's overall criminal justice system. The dismal conditions in prisons, where criminality persists, stems from structural problems of the criminal justice system itself. The overcrowding of prisons, not investing in the salaries and training of prison staff and a lack of resources have all contributed to prisons' inability to fulfil their role as venues of reformatory justice. Though a number of reforms have been carried out in the area of prosecution and policing, successive governments have failed to accord priority to prisons and their staff. Lack of capacity of the prison staff combined with a situation where their transfers and promotions are often compromised on account of political interference, creates conditions ripe for exploitation by criminal elements. For instance, as demonstrated by the petition before the IHC, a prisoner, Irfan Iqbal revealed the nexus between a land-grabbing gang and the prison authorities. There are other examples too, like Omar Saeed Sheikh, who, from his cell in Hyderabad, allegedly made hoax calls to key leaders in India and Pakistan in an attempt to ratchet up tensions between the two countries.

The authorities should ensure full accountability of prison officials who allow reformatory premises to be turned into dens of crime. As a starting point, they can note their domestic and international commitments and work towards reforming a faulty criminal justice system that has neither curbed lawbreaking behaviour nor emphasised the rehabilitation of prisoners. If matters are left as they are, once released, prisoners will return to a life of crime.

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New security policy

THE federal cabinet has approved the National Security Policy after its green-lighting by the National Security Committee and the military spokesman has said that the armed forces will play their role in achieving the vision laid out in the policy.

National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf told the media on Tuesday that it is a "citizen-centric" policy with economic security at the core. The policy took seven years to draft and included consultation with relevant people from all walks of life. It will be an evolving document so that it can retain relevance with changing times. Prime Minister Imran Khan has asked Dr Yusuf to provide monthly

updates on the implementation of the policy. The NSA has said that a version of the policy will soon be shared with the public.

The report comes at a critical time when Pakistan is faced with multiple national security challenges. Keeping economic security at its core is also a sensible approach now that geoeconomics is the central tenet of our larger policy framework. It is hoped that the national security policy will focus attention on key priority areas and the approach required to realise the stated objectives. In addition, the policy should also bring greater coordination between various government agencies within the national security domain.

The fate of Nacta — an organisation that has been allowed to decay — is a stark warning that the best intentions can fall victim to turf wars and ego clashes. If this national security policy can facilitate smooth inter-agency and inter-organisation cooperation in this area, it would be able to achieve productive results.

However, there are some aspects of the policy that require prompt action. It was originally presented in the parliamentary committee which the opposition boycotted but this does not mean that the policy does not require proper debate. Now that the cabinet has approved it, the document should be shared with all parliamentarians and tabled in both Houses so that it can be debated and discussed threadbare. For it to be truly effective, the policy needs to have more input from legislators.

Another important question that the policy should pursue is trade with India. Since it is economic-centric, the policy requires an indepth review of whether Pakistan will benefit more by trading with India instead of staying away to register its rejection of New Delhi's illegal occupation of Kashmir and especially the action of Aug 5, 2019.

There is a strong body of opinion among experts that states that trade should not be held hostage to politics, especially if it is in the economic interest of rivals to keep the doors of trade open without compromising on their political positions. It is high time Pakistan debated this issue with utmost seriousness instead of allowing emotions to drive policy. The national security policy should bring much-needed clarity in this respect.

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Real estate attraction

THE real estate sector — developed and undeveloped land for housing, commercial and industrial projects — has experienced an unmatched boom during the last one year on the back of unprecedented tax, monetary and regulatory incentives. The incentive package, which included a tax amnesty for investors for illegal money held by them, was announced in order to kick-start growth by encouraging the construction industry in the midst of the Covid outbreak and drive investments in low-cost housing to provide shelter to 5m low-middle-income households as promised by the PTI before the 2018 elections. In Pakistan, the real estate sector has always remained a preferred venue of investment not only for individual investors but also businesses because it is considered a safer option with a steady cash flow stream and higher returns. But it has also attracted illegal money because of negligible taxes and weak regulations. The PTI government's tax amnesty scheme has only added to its attraction, with large funds diverted to land by local investors as well as overseas Pakistanis, who can now easily buy real estate remotely.

But the government's decision to rely on real estate and construction for rapid growth has had unintended consequences for the economy and potential homeowners. It has driven up land prices — massively — across the country, put land out of the middle classes' reach, and made real estate more appealing than industrial investments because of quicker, larger returns. Likewise, the brisk turnaround in the real estate and construction sector is considered an important factor in the surge in domestic inflation and import demand growth at the expense of the balance of payments. The recently revised property valuations notified by FBR for 40 cities in order to narrow the gap between the market prices of immovable property and the rates at which such transactions are taxed to generate additional revenues have somewhat dampened market sentiments. As immense pressure is exerted by the developers, builders and realtors on FBR to review its new valuations, the question is: will it be a wise move for the government to give in to their unjustified demand? With the government looking to increase one of the world's lowest tax-to-GDP ratios for meeting its expenditure needs, it will not be advisable to forgo tax revenues from such transactions. The real estate players have received more than their due in the form of tax amnesties. Now is the time for the government to properly tax and regulate this sector.

Confession not enough

A CONFESSION does not an open-and-shut case make. That was the crux of a verdict by Justice Muhammad Tariq Nadeem of the Lahore High Court which acquitted a man convicted of a murder committed, as the appellant himself had said, in self-defence. The responsibility of proving a case beyond any shadow of reasonable doubt lies squarely with the prosecution, the judge wrote, adding: “If it fails to successfully discharge it, the only result can be the extension of benefit of doubt to the accused person.” The appellant in the case had been convicted under Section 302(c) of the Pakistan Penal Code and sentenced to 14 years’ rigorous imprisonment.

The argument of the complainant’s counsel, that the confession of the accused had rendered the weakness of the prosecution’s case irrelevant, fails on the general criminal law principle of *corpus delicti* which holds that a confession by itself is not enough for a conviction. The prosecution must gather evidence of a standard that is independently sufficient to incriminate the accused. In the instant case, as per the verdict, evidence to link the appellant with the offence was woefully missing and “it is an obvious principle of law that in case of doubt, the benefit thereof must accrue in favour of a suspect as a matter of right and not of grace”. This is a sound conclusion which takes into the account the reality of false confessions which can be made for various reasons or obtained in various ways and, if taken as incontrovertible evidence of guilt, can lead to unsafe convictions. In an inequitable society like ours, where the criminal justice system often fails to deliver justice, it is particularly important to factor this in. Here, in some areas where oppressive systems still hold sway, the powerful can coerce the weak —on pain of social and economic sanctions — into paying the price for crimes that they themselves have committed. Law enforcement will scarcely go out of its way to uncover the veracity or otherwise of a seemingly voluntary confession. After all, in Pakistan’s ‘thana culture’, torture for the purpose of extracting ‘confessions’ out of suspects remains a time-tested method of drawing a line under investigations and/or pleasing political patrons. It is thus in the interest of justice for judges to hold the prosecution to a high standard, where it can make its case independently of any confession.

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Revisiting Reko Diq

THE provincial PTI chief in Balochistan, Sardar Yar Mohammad Rind, has called for the establishment of a truth commission on the Reko Diq fiasco before closing a new deal on the gold and copper mining project.

The demand came days after Chief Minister Mir Abdul Qudoos Bizenjo's government had organised an in camera briefing for the provincial lawmakers to update them on different aspects of the issue. Given the \$6bn penalty for not giving a mining lease to the Tethyan Copper Company, announced by the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes against Pakistan, and the subsequent embarrassment suffered internationally, Mr Rind's demand is justified.

After all, the people deserve to know who is responsible for this debacle. The Balochistan government's decision to take its lawmakers into confidence is a welcome step but not enough. The taxpayers, who will be asked to pay for this fiasco, also have a right to be informed on the matter.

When the ICSID announced the award over a breach of the Australia-Pakistan Bilateral Investment Treaty and denial of the mining lease to TCC at Reko Diq in 2011, Prime Minister Imran Khan had formed a commission to "investigate the reasons as to how Pakistan ended up in this predicament, who was responsible for making the country suffer such a loss and what are the lessons learnt so that mistakes made do not repeat in the future".

But the commission is yet to conclude its assignment and make its findings public. Hence, the demand from the provincial chief of the ruling party must be heeded and a new commission set up to carry out its investigation within public view for the sake of transparency. Responsibility needs to be fixed as it is not just an issue of enormous fines that the country is being asked to pay for poor governance and faulty decision-making but also lack of transparency in matters of public importance.

Reko Diq, however, isn't the only case where the authorities concerned have messed up. The country and its economy continue to suffer the adverse consequences of poor governance, bureaucratic incompetence and judicial overreach in several other instances as well.

For example, the nation is still paying a high price for the apex court decisions that stopped the privatisation of the Steel Mills and invalidated the LNG deal with a French company at the expense of the national economy in the mid-2000s. Likewise, the recent penalties imposed on Pakistan in the Broadsheet case illustrate the incompetence of the bureaucracy in protecting national interests.

The statement given by Mr Bizenjo that “the rights and interests of Balochistan will be protected in any new [Reko Diq] deal” must be appreciated. But such statements from the rulers alone will not reassure the people unless those responsible for past debacles are named and held to account for their misdeeds.

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Snow season

MANAGING tourism is tricky. While it is necessary and laudable for numerous reasons, including area uplift, economy-boosting activities and citizens’ pleasure, it must also be balanced with realism, practicality and administrative abilities. In the current season, the example of the hill station of Murree and the Galliyat is fitting. With the first snowfalls of the year, the area has been inundated with visitors. This other day, the Rawalpindi deputy commissioner’s office reminded tourists to keep checking administrative advisories regarding weather and traffic conditions, since the small station of Murree with a parking capacity of about 4,000 vehicles had already been inundated with some 50,000 vehicles. Also included in the advisory were reminders that vehicles, especially their tyres, should be in a well-functioning condition with suitable air pressure, that cars should not block traffic by stopping so that occupants could take photographs, and that parking in illegal spots was a major traffic hazard causing untold inconvenience. Such advice ought not be needed at all in any society more aware of the law and its own responsibilities.

The truth is, however, that under the pressure of a haste-friendly and quite often heedless society, the administration has not only to deal as best as it can with the outcome, but also provide defences for itself where unavoidable failures become apparent. The situation can be fairly easily turned around. In terms of Murree and the Galliyat, as a case in point, what is needed is a mass awareness campaign through proper media platforms before the onset of the tourist season — rather than after, when last-minute, mitigating measures must be taken. For

citizens in the vicinity, these destinations — as opposed to those further north — are preferable, since they constitute a day trip from the ICT/ Rawalpindi area. And so they are, in more clement weather. But with sleet and snow, there have been numerous occasions of visitors being stranded because of bad weather. Educating the citizenry prior to the event is the only reasonable answer.

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New variant

THE new year approaches on a grim note. Covid-19 numbers are skyrocketing globally, with close to an unprecedented 900,000 cases detected daily on average between Dec 22-28. Several countries, including the US, Australia and multiple European nations have recorded all-time high numbers as the Omicron variant spreads like wild fire across the world, putting a damper on traditional end-of-year festivities and hopes of an economic revival. While studies suggest that Omicron presents with milder symptoms than earlier variants even though it is far more transmissible, unvaccinated individuals are at higher risk of serious infection. Hospitals are filling up fast with those who have been unable to or chosen not to get the jab. Even in the case of mild Covid-19 infections, a precipitous increase in numbers strains health systems by overburdening laboratories, pharmacies, medical staff, etc. Then there are knock-on effects, such as small businesses struggling to stay afloat despite loss of employees who have contracted the infection or been ordered to quarantine.

Last year around this time, the roll-out of vaccines against Covid-19 had been a harbinger of hope that the world would finally be able to put this deadly chapter behind it. While Omicron and the astonishing speed with which it is spreading has proved that to be a false dawn, we are nevertheless far better equipped than we were to stave off the infection and prevent the mass fatalities that occurred in many parts of the globe in 2020. Countries are once again putting in place measures such as limiting social gatherings, closing down venues where crowds gather including cinemas, concert halls, etc. In terms of the Omicron variant, Asia has been a comparative latecomer to the 'party'; strict quarantine rules for incoming travellers and compliance with instructions to wear masks have helped keep the numbers low in places like Japan, South Korea and Thailand.

Even before Pakistan's first case of Omicron was confirmed on Dec 13, Federal Planning Minister Asad Umar had warned that the new variant's arrival in the country was inevitable. He did, however, add that we could "reduce its effects by adopting preventive measures" and urged everyone to get themselves vaccinated. According to the National Command and Operation Centre, 30pc of Pakistan's total population and 46pc of its eligible population is fully vaccinated. Nevertheless, tough times lie ahead if the current trend continues. The number of confirmed Omicron infections had gone up to 79 by Tuesday. Equally worryingly, on Dec 29, Pakistan detected 482 new Covid-19 cases: it was the first time in nearly four weeks that the tally had exceeded 400. While public messaging about preventive measures has increased, anecdotal evidence suggests that airport protocols have become fairly lax, particularly when several flights arrive within a short span of time. With WHO warning of a Covid 'tsunami', we cannot allow any flank to be exposed.

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Gas shortage

THE government seems to have finally woken up to the adverse impact of the growing energy shortages on the economy, with the prime minister directing 'expeditious issuance of licences for domestic exploration of gas to meet the increasing demand, especially in winters'.

Presiding over a meeting to review gas shortages in the country on Wednesday, he also ordered the relevant ministries and departments to remove the hurdles in the way of the two planned private LNG terminals and virtual pipeline projects to increase gas imports to fill the supply gap. That the chief executive of the country had to intervene to facilitate the investors waiting for regulatory and other approvals from the government for months and years means that the ministries and authorities concerned are not doing their job properly. Otherwise, the infrastructure schemes for the import of gas would either have been operational by now or near completion. The delays in the grant of approvals on flimsy reasons are a sign that the government needs to urgently overhaul the energy ministry and its attached departments.

At present, Pakistan faces a gas supply gap of 1,300mmfcd. This could have been significantly reduced if the government had allowed the two existing

terminals to increase their import capacity by 600mmfcd — something that could be done in a few weeks — and sell directly to industrial consumers without incurring any liability on the exchequer. Likewise, a considerable amount of LPG could have been extracted for domestic consumers had the gas supply to the JJVL plant in Jamshoro not been stopped in 2020.

Because of bureaucratic red tape, we are not able to fully utilise the existing energy infrastructure. On the oil and gas exploration front, the situation is worse. Almost 10 foreign companies have left Pakistan in recent years because of bad policies and bureaucratic hurdles, resulting in declining exploration activities and no new important discovery in the last decade and more.

While the short-term solution to the country's energy shortages lies in removing infrastructure bottlenecks in order to ensure smooth imports to meet domestic demand, energy problems cannot be tackled in the long term without encouraging exploration of untapped local energy resources. That will not happen unless an 'ease of doing business' environment is created for the investors. For that, we need a long-term, holistic energy policy and a responsive energy bureaucracy. Or we can keep rationing the available gas and spend precious foreign exchange on imports.

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Decriminalising suicide

THE arguments in the Senate which led to the deferment of a bill aiming to decriminalise attempted suicide earlier this week, reveal to a large degree why mental health remains a grossly misunderstood concept in Pakistani society. The bill recommended doing away with Section 325 of the Pakistan Penal Code that makes both suicide and attempted suicide a criminal offence. Under the law, attempted suicide carries a jail term of up to one year or a fine, or both. However, the bill was deferred over the perception that suicide is forbidden by religion. Interestingly, the Council of Islamic Ideology had unanimously approved a similar bill in 2018 after which it was presented in the National Assembly. Unfortunately, the bill lapsed following a change in government.

According to the WHO, there were 19,331 suicides in 2019 in Pakistan. But these are only the instances that came to light as the social and religious taboo

associated with taking one's own life prevents many cases from being reported as suicide. Moreover, the fact that attempted suicide is a crime punishable by imprisonment discourages many from seeking psychiatric help. The absence of treatment can lead to further suicide attempts which may not fail the second time. A large number of those who are on the verge of taking their own lives have treatable mental disorders, but given the paucity of mental health facilities and social obstacles in the country, their silent cries for help go unheeded and they take the extreme decision to end their life. To throw such people at the mercy of a deeply flawed criminal justice system which offers little to no recourse to the mentally ill is inhumane. Our policymakers must find practical and compassionate solutions to prevent suicides. The first step would be to enable people to seek help. This can only be achieved by decriminalising attempted suicide. The government should also establish a countrywide suicide register that presents accurate data on the number and circumstances of suicidal patients to help devise targeted interventions.

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