

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of January 2021*

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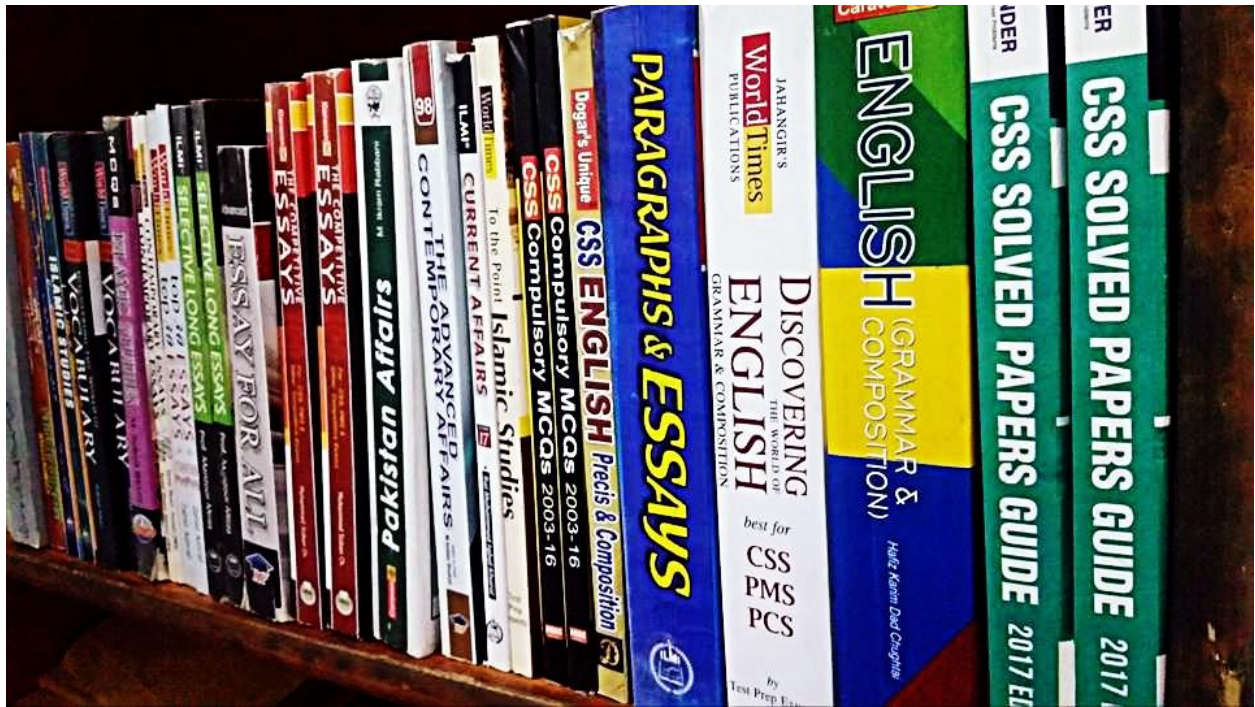
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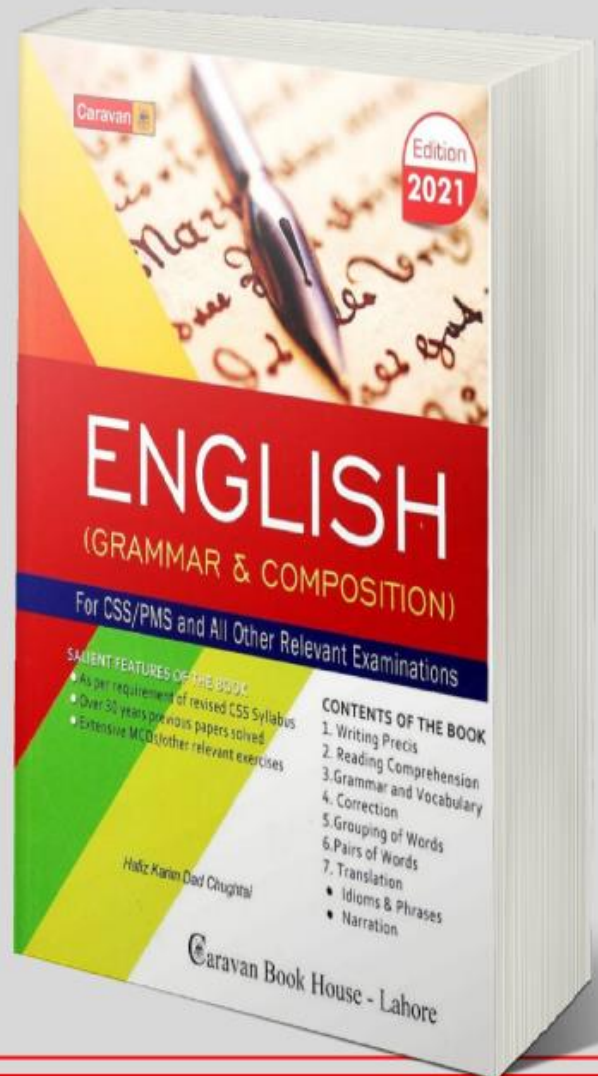
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## **Rule of the mob**

ON Wednesday, a raucous mob descended on the shrine of a Hindu saint in Teri village, on the outskirts of Karak, KP. Soon, videos of men — old and young, even children — tearing the building apart and setting it ablaze began circulating online. Unfortunately, Pakistan is no stranger to mob violence. According to witnesses, this horde was led by a local cleric and religious party leader. Police have now arrested 14 people in connection with that day's rampage, while Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed has taken notice of the disgraceful incident. Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj's samadhi has been in the news before. Built sometime in the early 20th century, it was a pilgrimage spot for the Hindu community, but was demolished in 1997 by another mob. In 2015, the Supreme Court ordered the provincial government to restore the shrine. Five years later, it lies in ashes again. What support will the government offer to the beleaguered Hindu community and how will it ensure that such attacks are not repeated?

Only a few months earlier, religious hardliners had obstructed the construction of the Shri Krishna temple in the nation's capital. It seems like the government's attempts to show religious tolerance are futile when large sections of society are steeped in bigotry and some have not even spared Muslim shrines; our leaders rarely demonstrate the kind of resolve that is needed to eliminate intolerance. Even if the Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj's samadhi issue is rooted in a land dispute — and not religion, as claimed by some — it is far too easy for anyone to use faith as a cloak to hide behind, or as a weapon to coerce, harass, and eventually kill off 'weaker' members of society. The previous year has been marked by grief and trial for many, and there have been a number of violent attacks against minorities. One can only pray that the new year brings peace to all — in particular the vulnerable and marginalised sections of society.

## **Year of pain**

AS the sun rises on New Year's Day, there is hope that some semblance of normality will return to the global order. In 2020, the international system was upended by Covid-19, with the coronavirus destroying routines and enforcing a 'new normal' on billions. Though the infection was first identified in December 2019, its full, deadly impact was felt in 2020, when it was declared a pandemic. Recovery will take time; a second wave is tearing through nations across the world. While a number of vaccines have been readied to fight the disease, raising hopes that the tide may soon turn, the emergence of variants of the virus in the UK and South Africa pose fresh challenges to the global health community.

Indeed, there have been several significant developments in 2020. But momentous events such as the defeat of the Trump White House, the Brexit deal, and the shifting sands of the Middle East where a number of Arab-speaking countries have embraced Israel have been overshadowed by the death and economic devastation inflicted by the pandemic. While hundreds of millions across the world continue to be threatened by war and poverty on a daily basis, the coronavirus has shown that healthcare cannot be ignored by global policymakers. Once mighty economies have been brought crashing down as thousands queue outside food banks. Whole sectors are enduring extreme turbulence, millions of jobs are at risk, or have already been lost. Countless children across the world have had their education and exams disrupted, with those without access to technology missing out on online learning. But these are all by-products of the pandemic. At its heart, it has shaken the global health system to its core, from advanced countries all the way down to the developing world. At the time of writing, the global caseload was 82.8m, while nearly 2m people had succumbed to the virus or post-Covid complications.

Looking ahead, the international community must firm up its resolve to fight this pandemic, which does not recognise borders and jurisdictions. Richer states must not be allowed to procure all available vaccines; poorer states should be given equal access. Front-line health workers and individuals at high risk must be prioritised everywhere. Crucially, it is time that the movers and shakers of the global order realised that healthcare is essential, as diseases can devastate the international social and political order. As for Pakistan, thanks to an effective strategy and good fortune during the first wave of the pandemic the country escaped the worst. However, the second wave is proving lethal and the state cannot afford to let its guard down. People must be reminded that the danger has not passed, and that social distancing and good hygiene practices remain the best weapons to fight Covid-19, while wild conspiracy theories should be countered with facts.

## **Passport drama**

AFTER claiming for months that it will bring former prime minister Nawaz Sharif back to Pakistan from London, the government has decided to cancel his passport. Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid made the sudden announcement during a press conference in the capital days after he said he would check when Mr Sharif's passport would expire. Sources in his ministry revealed, however, that Mr Sharif's passport is set to expire on Feb 16, so it appears that the interior ministry will not renew his passport if such an application is made.

While many are saying that the cancellation of Mr Sharif's passport will render him 'stateless', the fact remains that he is a Pakistani national and the deprivation of his passport simply limits his international travel.

Although Mr Rashid made the announcement as if it was good news for the government, it is unclear how this will benefit the PTI — as even the optics of the move to cancel his passport are confusing at best. A lot of noise has been made on the issue of Mr Sharif's extradition from the UK, where he has been living since November 2019 after getting bail and government permission to travel abroad on the pretext of medical treatment.

Since then, he has been declared an absconder by the Islamabad High Court and an accountability court, and the government has vowed to bring him back. In this regard, several ministers and advisers have given deadlines of January 2021 and made tall claims about the "impending success" of their requests for his extradition to the British government. It appears that the government's efforts to persuade the UK to remove Mr Sharif were unsuccessful, as no positive response has come from the UK Home Office.

Instead of contemplating its next steps in the matter, such as beginning a conversation with the British authorities about an extradition treaty, the government has rushed to cancel Mr Sharif's passport — which means even if he wishes, he cannot travel to Pakistan. Not only is this an own goal, it is also a strange message for the government to give to the public about its intentions. Under pressure of their own deadlines, it appears the authorities have concluded that if they cannot somehow force Mr Sharif to return now, they do not want him at all. The passport cancellation is pure politics and will not impress anyone. If anything, it gives Mr Sharif a fresh excuse to evade the courts and remain in the UK

## **Nursing excellence**

IN a refreshing bit of news, eight Pakistani nurses and midwives have been included among the Global-2020 100 Outstanding Women Nurses and Midwives. The list comprises 100 professionals from a total of 43 countries who have been recognised by global agencies including WHO, UNFPA, the International Council of Nursing and International Confederation of Midwives for their contribution to raising healthcare standards across the world. Interestingly, all eight Pakistani nurses acknowledged for their services are graduates of the Aga Khan University's School of Nursing and Midwifery. This list comes at an appropriate time; the services of healthcare workers have never been more significant in a world reeling from the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As front-line fighters against Covid-19, workers in the medical field have been greatly lauded. However, the discourse — at least in Pakistan —

has revolved mostly around doctors, and not enough has been said about the nursing profession whose members are equally, if not more, exposed to Covid-19 as they carry out their duties at various public and private hospitals. Though this worldwide list of 100 best nurses comes at the conclusion of a year-long WHO campaign, it is a good effort towards drawing attention towards the significance of the profession itself.

Indeed, the ambit of services nurses provide, from specialised critical care to family planning at homes, is the bedrock of any country's healthcare system. It is therefore unfortunate that the government has greatly neglected this profession. The Pakistan Nursing Council has failed to function as an autonomous body due to the indifference of successive federal and provincial governments. This is why very few of the approximately 160 nursing schools in the country provide adequate teaching to students, leaving them untrained and unskilled. In fact, the shortage of trained and skilled nursing staff has been one of the major issues faced by tertiary care hospitals treating critical Covid-19 patients. One hopes that the government invests in producing skilled nursing staff, thus improving the quality of healthcare services overall.

## **IHK killings**

AS 2021 begins, there are few signs that New Delhi is willing to change its tried, tested and failed methods in India-held Kashmir. Yet New Delhi's attempts to militarily subdue the Kashmiris and make them renounce their desire for freedom and dignity are bound to fail; despite the passage of over a year since India revoked the disputed region's autonomous status, the people of IHK have yet to accept this illegal move. However, the Indian establishment continues to employ brutal methods to crush the Kashmiri spirit, as was witnessed during a dubious recent 'encounter'.

As per reports, three youths were gunned down by Indian forces on Tuesday after they were cornered inside a home. While the occupied region's police say two of the victims were "hardcore associates of terrorists", the families dispute this. Among the victims were two students said to be on their way to Srinagar for tutoring.

Unfortunately, it seems that due process does not matter for much in the held region, as New Delhi's armed enforcers are free to kill whomever they choose. The incident bears a grim resemblance to an episode that occurred last July, when three labourers were killed. Then also Indian forces had claimed weapons had been found on the victims. However, this lie was recently exposed when an Indian army officer and two others were charged with planting weapons on the bodies.



It appears that the right-wing BJP-led government in New Delhi is aping the tactics the Israelis use against the Palestinians. In occupied Palestine, too, an armed-to-the-teeth military machine uses unrestrained force against a dispossessed population fighting for its rights, often murdering children and women in the process. Yet sadly, some of the most powerful actors on the world stage shield both Israel and India against criticism of such blatant rights abuses, and instead, tout their 'democratic' credentials. This hypocrisy must end.

## **Amnesty extension**

THE decision to extend the construction amnesty scheme was widely anticipated. Prime Minister Imran Khan described the extension of the fiscal, monetary and policy incentives announced in April last year to encourage investments in real estate as a 'New Year gift' for the construction industry. According to the FBR, the government has extended tax amnesty, the most controversial part of the package, for investors — builders and developers — for another six months to June 30, as well as the period for them to avail a fixed tax regime to the end of the calendar year. Moreover, the deadline for investors to complete their projects registered with the FBR under the package has been stretched to September 2023. Likewise, buyers of housing units and plots will enjoy tax immunity on their investment until March 2023. The banks will continue to disburse cheaper, subsidised mortgage finance to consumers till December. Both the prime minister and investors are hopeful that the package will offset the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy and create jobs.

Indeed, the incentive package has largely produced the desired results of reviving a dormant construction industry and creating employment opportunities for daily wagers. The sale of construction material eg cement, steel and glass has grown rapidly with land prices in many cities peaking again. This has afforded the government, which had otherwise been struggling to show some achievement on the economic front, an opportunity to brandish the numbers to underline its 'success' in rescuing the economy from the virus's adverse impact. Still, the tax amnesty for real-estate investments has also raised questions about the ruling party's position on corruption and its so-called accountability drive. If real-estate investors can be given a waiver on ill-gotten money, why target the others and not extend a similar amnesty to them for the sake of the economy and political stability?

While Mr Khan happily informed the nation that real-estate incentives had so far brought in investments of Rs186bn with more projects worth Rs116bn in the process of registration, there are indications that the bulk of new investments has been made in land rather than construction. There is no doubt that several construction projects that had stalled because of fear of NAB action or the government's economic stabilisation policies — especially in Karachi

— have been revived, explaining the increased cement and steel sales. But the fact remains that investors have mostly used the scheme to launder their illegal money through land sale and purchase instead of investing in construction. The real impact of the incentives package on the construction industry will not be known unless the FBR starts to release the details of the projects and updates the status of construction activity on a quarterly basis. Similarly, the State Bank should devise a mechanism for reporting new housing finance disbursements by the banks for the sake of transparency.

## **Rs10m fine**

THANKFULLY, there are some quarters in Pakistan willing to use their authority to signal the unacceptability of forcibly disappearing people. Usually, for much of officialdom, the issue of missing people is the elephant in the room they had much rather ignore. On Friday, the Islamabad High Court took the unprecedented step of slapping a Rs10m fine on the authorities for their failure in tracing the whereabouts of Ghulam Qadir who has been missing since six years. Justice Mohsin Kayani singled out the defence and interior secretaries and the SSP and SHO of the police station concerned as the government functionaries at fault in the matter. The court thus disposed of the petition filed by Mr Qadir's brother, but warned the authorities that if he was not recovered in a month's time, they would face a departmental inquiry.

It has often fallen to the courts to lend an ear to the desperate families of the victims and attempt to shake the authorities out of their torpor. Former chief justice of the Supreme Court Iftikhar Chaudhry made a concerted effort to address the issue, even summoning intelligence officials for questioning — which was unheard of. However, as far as penalties go, the Rs10m fine is the most severe by far. Fines of Rs2m have been imposed twice before, also by the IHC, in July 2020 and November 2018 for the same reason on relevant government functionaries. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances whose twofold mandate is to trace the missing and hold the perpetrators accountable has utterly failed in the latter function. Despite its considerable powers, the commission appears indifferent to the importance of its role in curbing enforced disappearances, to the anguish of the victims' families. Its November 2020 press release noted that 6,854 cases in total had come before the commission. Of these, 4,782 cases had been disposed of by Nov 30. 'Disposal' here means simply that the whereabouts of the missing individuals have been determined. The entries of the 21 cases 'disposed of' in November are telling: they manifest no attempt to get to the bottom of why the missing person was abducted in the first place or to punish the perpetrators. Instead, there is a passive acceptance of the facts. Enforced disappearances are an egregious violation of fundamental rights to security of person and due process. Does the commission have no desire to see real justice done?

## Opposition unity

THE new announcement by the Pakistan Democratic Movement that it will participate in the upcoming by-polls is a promising indicator of its members' ability to show flexibility for the sake of the alliance — and a sign that the government should not take the PDM threat lightly.

That the 11-party alliance will contest the by-elections on two National Assembly seats and six provincial assembly seats despite some of the members expressing reservations earlier shows that, while differences of opinion exist on some key issues, the PDM has the resolve to stay together and persist in its opposition to the government.

The differences are obvious. Maulana Fazlur Rehman is a hardliner with nothing to lose; Maryam Nawaz is reeling from the government onslaught on her family and party; and the PPP is hedging its bets. But the common goal, as evidenced by the PDM chairman's speech on Friday, is that these parties will no longer tolerate the interference of the security establishment in matters of civilian governance. While the various members of the alliance use words of varying degrees of severity when speaking of this alleged meddling — some harsh and others less so — the messages being sent to both the government and security establishment are from one stage and platform.

The PDM has several hurdles to overcome and critical issues to resolve in the coming days — resignations and the Senate elections being the key challenges — and its future will be determined by the alliance's ability to build consensus in a politically uncertain environment. But the movement's common goal thus far has been a unifying factor.

If the alliance manages to stay together and move forward even with the coming challenges, the government and the security establishment must not take their demands and warnings lightly. The threatened long march, if it materialises, can trigger a season of dread. It was not too long ago that the country, especially the citizens and administration in the capital, were both fixated with and paralysed by Mr Khan's anti-government dharna. Although his key demands were not met and the dharna was eventually called off, the prolonged sit-in made governance and security a huge challenge. The political uncertainty was palpable and its effects on the economy as well as the message to the international community were significant.

A PDM-led long march, given the number of member parties and the size of their rallies thus far, will be a thorn in the government's side. Depending on what kind of power show the alliance can pull off and how long it will be sustained for, it is not too early to think about which side will prevail.

For Mr Khan to think this is going to fizzle out and go away is naive. In this environment, the government must end its posturing and reflect on the fallout of an upcoming crisis. Dialogue is a wise next step.

## Uneasy times

WITH only a few weeks left before Donald Trump exits the White House, the situation in the Middle East — particularly the Gulf — remains precarious, with fears that the US president may up the ante in the region in the final days of his administration. According to a tweet by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, the US is preparing a pretext for war with his country. Mr Zarif's apprehensions have been strengthened by the fact that the US recently sent two B52 bombers to the region, while speculations are rife that Washington may strike pro-Tehran militias in Iraq, or Iran itself. The situation has been tense since America assassinated top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis a year ago on this day. While the threat of war was averted after a few close calls, the unpredictable Mr Trump may deliver a parting shot that can destabilise an already fragile region. Moreover, Iran has said it will enrich uranium up till 20pc, further abandoning its commitments to the 2015 nuclear deal, an accord the US left unilaterally. In reaction to the American moves in the region, Mr Zarif has said his country will “openly and directly” defend itself.

Needless to say, any provocation from the Trump administration at this juncture will be a folly of the highest order, though the president's allies in the Middle East — Israel and some of the Gulf Arabs — would not oppose it. It will instantly torpedo any chances of a rapprochement between the US and Iran that Joe Biden may be planning. Therefore, wiser elements in Washington need to ensure that no brinkmanship is resorted to in the transition period. Let the new administration take over, and give it a chance to mend fences with Iran. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic should also refrain from further enrichment and try to engage with the new American president. While US-Iranian rapprochement is highly difficult, it is worth trying when the alternative is conflict.

## Sanctity of contracts

THE Pakistani taxpayer has to foot yet another bill. The government is paying a whopping \$28.7m from the national treasury to a Washington-based asset recovery firm Broadsheet LLC because it reneged on a contractual agreement. At the centre of this debacle is the National Accountability Bureau that had signed the original agreement with the company to recover stolen assets stashed in various offshore accounts.

The disagreement between the two parties ended up in court which ruled against NAB and the government of Pakistan, resulting in the payment of damages. It is a familiar story of official incompetence, poor judgement, irresponsible handling and shoddy legal defence leading to a steep cost being paid by the country. If this were a one-off issue, perhaps it could have been attributed to one department's blunder. Sadly, it has now become a trend. There is a long list of cases where Pakistan has lost in international courts and is either appealing the judgements or negotiating with the aggrieved party on the amount to be repaid. The most glaring example is of the Tethyan Copper Company which won an award against Pakistan totalling nearly \$6bn. The story of the blunder was similar: a contract agreed upon and then reneged upon.

Read: Mining firm moves Virgin Islands court for enforcement of Reko Diq award against Pakistan

At play is a deeper malaise — the inability of Pakistani officialdom to recognise the sanctity of contracts. This grave weakness — perhaps bordering on criminal apathy and negligence — manifests itself in the casualness with which such disputes are handled. It is also reflective of a deeply flawed understanding of how disputes of an international nature should be tackled and what could be the costs of blundering on the legal front. A similarly cavalier approach is visible in this latest case. Officials of the federal government and NAB are, as usual, blaming previous governments instead of pinning specific responsibilities, learning the right lessons, and putting in place a corrective mechanism that ensures such huge blunders are not repeated. The unavoidable conclusion at this stage, however, is that soon this too will become business as usual in order to cover up internal weaknesses and systemic inadequacies. No one will be held accountable for the steep cost that Pakistan has been compelled to pay for official incompetence.

There is, however, an opportunity for the PTI government. If it really means what it says about fixing this broken system, it could treat this latest issue as a diagnostic and prescriptive test case. Prime Minister Imran Khan is in the unenviable position of having to pay these enormous damages under his watch, and therefore, instead of just signing the cheque and moving on, he should order a thorough inquiry at all levels to determine what went wrong, who made it go wrong and what can be done to fix the loopholes in the system. Pakistan cannot afford this trend any longer.



## Circular debt

THE government's plan to settle the outstanding dues of IPPs amounting to Rs450bn in three tranches is only the first step towards liquidation of the power sector's circular debt. According to reports, the IPPs will get 30pc of their existing debt stock this month and the remaining amount in two equal tranches in June and December. Under the plan, one-third of the arrears will be paid to the power producers in cash and the remainder in the form of Pakistan Investment Bonds at the floating rate. The IMF also gave its nod to the plan after the government agreed to heftily increase the base electricity tariff as demanded by the lender of the last resort. The payment of the first tranche will immediately lead to materialisation of the MoUs signed between the government and power producers in August last year into formal agreements. The MoUs provide for changes in the terms of the existing power purchase agreements that will reduce the size of the guaranteed capacity payments or fixed costs paid to the IPPs, a major source of accumulation of the circular debt. The government is expecting savings of Rs850bn over a period of 10 years, following the modifications in PPAs. The IPPs, which had demanded full payment of their money before they agreed to implement their revised PPAs, seem to have moved away from their earlier position in the 'larger interest of the country' as the plan will also help them improve their tight liquidity position and make new investments in new schemes.

The settlement scheme covers the 50-odd IPPs which were set up in the 1990s and 2000s and had consented to the alterations proposed in their power purchase deals with the government. The majority of these plants have completed their life cycles or paid off their debts. Therefore, we should not expect an immediate resolution of the circular debt problem even after materialisation of the revised deals with the IPPs. In recent years, the major build-up in the circular debt has been caused by capacity payments to large power projects set up since 2015, primarily as part of the multibillion-dollar CPEC initiative, with Chinese money. So far, no progress has been made to get the terms of the PPAs with these companies renegotiated although we are told that contacts have been made with Beijing at the highest level. Until these contacts pay off, the resolution of the mounting power-sector debt will have to wait.

## Clean water

MUCH has been said and written about the persistent shortage of clean drinking water in the country. However, no government seems to take note of the challenge or the fact that failure to meet this fundamental need of the population has exacted a huge toll on lives and health. A recent report published by the Pakistan Medical Association states that nearly two-thirds of

200m Pakistanis have been deprived of clean potable water, putting them at greater risk of contracting serious illnesses. Nowhere is this aspect more apparent than in the number of deaths caused by diarrhoea, which is a water-borne disease and the leading cause of mortality among infants in the country. Moreover, according to the PMA report, the incredibly poor quality of water is also responsible for 30pc of diseases and 40pc of deaths occurring in the country. The report has mentioned the 2019 XDR-typhoid outbreak in Sindh and the tenacious poliovirus that has yet to be eliminated. It is evident that these health concerns arise from bad sanitation and poor water quality.

Pakistan has the world's fourth highest consumption figures for water while its population is the fifth largest globally. Bad policies and environmentally damaging practices, such as the release of untreated industrial and domestic waste into water bodies, combined with changing rainfall patterns, have worsened water shortages in the country. Meanwhile, rapid and irregular urbanisation has exacerbated the strain on the country's water resources, to an extent where in the largest city, several localities have virtually no option but to do without running tap water for weeks on end. The IMF ranks Pakistan third in the list of nations that are suffering from acute water shortage, while other global agencies have warned that the country might run out of water altogether by 2025. The authorities need to realise the gravity of the situation and start work towards developing sustainable water supplies and better sanitation infrastructures if it wants to avoid a catastrophe that is just around the corner.

## **Hazara miners' slaughter**

HORROR has revisited the beleaguered Shia Hazara community once again. Early Sunday morning, 11 coal miners, all residents of Quetta's Hazara Town, were barbarically slain in Balochistan's mountainous Bolan district in an attack claimed by the militant Islamic State group. The men were apparently asleep in their mudbrick dwelling close by the mine that they worked when the assailants burst in, held them at gunpoint, and bound and blindfolded them.

Then, in an orgy of bestial violence, they slit the victims' throats. Some bodies also bore gunshot wounds. Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned the massacre as "yet another cowardly inhumane act of terrorism" and ordered the Frontier Corps to apprehend the killers. Further, he assured the victims' families that the government would not abandon them.

No doubt Mr Khan's words are well-intentioned. The bitter reality, however, is that the state has long abandoned the Shia Hazaras. In a cynically calculated move, it decided to turn a blind eye to violent extremists' depredations against the community in the province as long as these murderous groups also served to counter the Baloch insurgency that began during Gen

Musharraf's regime. As a result, nowhere in Balochistan are the Hazaras safe, except for their barricaded ghettos in Quetta. They have been blown up in suicide bombings and gunned down in the streets, their graveyards filling up with victims, many of them heartbreakingly young. On the cusp of life, these innocents paid the ultimate price for the state's monumental folly. As for the survivors, their livelihoods, educational opportunities, etc have been eviscerated. Those who can have sought asylum overseas.

While large-scale attacks like those in the first half of 2013 — that together massacred over 200 Hazaras and left more than 500 wounded — have not recurred, mainly because the community has isolated itself within two secure enclaves, they remain in peril. In April 2019, at least 20 people — including 10 Hazaras — were killed in a Quetta marketplace suicide bombing. The attack, which was aimed at the Shias, was also claimed by the IS. It is well known that the virulently sectarian Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, which has a continued presence in Balochistan, works closely with the transnational terrorist group. Surely, in a province crawling with security and intelligence personnel, violent extremists such as these should not be difficult to track down.

They could also be traced through the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, which also has an overtly anti-Shia agenda. But when one considers that the head of the ASWJ's Balochistan chapter, Ramzan Mengal, was released from prison — only two days before the marketplace bombing — and allowed to contest the 2018 general election, it becomes clear that there are wheels within wheels here. Certainly, there may be some truth to claims being made that those who slaughtered the coal miners last Sunday are foreign-funded, but the whole truth is far more nuanced.

## Afghan bloodshed

AS the Afghan government and the Taliban sit down for parleys in Doha today, deadly violence in the country over the past few months has cast its shadow over the process. Since November, a number of officials, activists and journalists have been killed in targeted hits. This ugly trend is of course part of the overall cycle of violence that plagues Afghanistan, pitting the government against the Taliban and other militant groups such as the local branch of IS. Among the high-profile victims of the latest series of killings has been the deputy governor of Kabul as well as five journalists. Strangely, the Afghan peace process has been marked by the dichotomy of violence coupled with talk — with ceasefires often punctured by fighting. However, considering the complexity of the Afghan situation, particularly the bloodshed that has affected Afghan national life for decades, there is no other option but for the stakeholders to sit at the negotiating table and work out a doable peace plan. However, there must be some red lines,

such as the protection of fundamental rights, specifically the safety of those that are critical of the government or armed groups.

Though no groups have claimed responsibility, it appears that the latest string of killings is an attempt by armed outfits to eliminate critical, independent voices, and send a message to others to keep quiet. As the government and the Taliban restart the dialogue process, Kabul should make it clear that such murderous attacks will not be tolerated. Afghan rights activists have expressed fears that there may be a rollback of rights and freedoms, particularly women's rights, if a peace deal is reached with the Taliban. Of course, the era when the armed group ruled over the country was one where women became practically invisible on the national scene. It would be shameful if attempts were made to reimpose such restrictions on women. Indeed, reaching a workable peace deal will not be easy; an Afghan government negotiator has said, with reference to the Doha process, that talks will be "complicated and time-consuming". However, all sides must realise that if this window of opportunity is lost, no one knows when the next chance will arise to end the deadly cycle of violence in Afghanistan. What is more, a final settlement must ensure equal rights for all of the country's tribes and ethnic groups, as well as women and minorities.

## **Petrol smuggling**

THE government wants to put a stop to the widespread smuggling of cheap, low quality Iranian petrol and diesel into the country through Balochistan. But it knows, deep down, that it can't; at least not until it can force oil marketing companies to expand their retail network across the sparsely populated province and completely secure the long border with Iran to block the illegal trade routes. Neither of these two tasks is easy. The OMCs are reluctant to expand their retail networks in most parts of the province because of low demand, high freight cost and poor security conditions. Likewise, the job of securing multiple smuggling routes across the treacherous terrain demands extensive deployment of manpower and the establishment of security check-posts, in addition to close cooperation from Tehran.

The plan recently approved by the prime minister to stop the sale of smuggled oil in parts of the country anticipates these difficulties, as well as the fact that it is smuggled Iranian oil that is keeping the wheels moving in most areas of Balochistan. Hence it has made the decision to focus on a customs-led crackdown against illegal petrol outlets in Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, besides cutting off supply lines of the smuggled oil from Balochistan in the first phase of the plan. In the second phase, the POL requirement of Balochistan will be mapped, legal retail outlets opened and a strategy to stall smuggling devised. The plan looks good, but only on paper. Its implementation will be fraught with difficulties and roadblocks, which are not

limited to the expansion of the networks of OMCs or the blockade of smuggling routes. The illegal flow of Iranian oil worth Rs250bn a year — in tankers and jerry cans mounted on jeeps and motorcycles, in full view of the border security forces, customs authorities and provincial administration — shows the involvement of a powerful mafia in this business. If the plan is to succeed, it must first target this ring.

## Gulf conclave

MEETING in the northern Saudi town of Al-Ula on Tuesday, in the shadow of the ancient metropolis of Madain Saleh, the princes and potentates of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council called for 'solidarity and stability'. The highlight of the event was the warm embrace between Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman and Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad.

Up till recently, such displays of camaraderie were unthinkable, as Riyadh led a campaign — backed by the UAE and Bahrain — to isolate Doha, holding up a charge sheet of lengthy 'transgressions' committed by Qatar. Saudi Arabia has reopened land, sea and air borders with Qatar after links were snapped in mid-2017. While fellow GCC members Kuwait and Oman are believed to have played a role in the rapprochement, the thaw has largely been engineered by the US; Donald Trump's son-in-law and Middle East emissary Jared Kushner was in Al-Ula, keeping a watchful eye over the proceedings.

While the detente is a positive development, questions remain over the intentions. If the motive is to improve regional relations by adhering to the principle of Gulf solidarity, then the move should be welcomed. However, if the alliance is being nudged to form a united front to confront Iran, then there would be reason to worry. Speaking at the ceremony, the Saudi crown prince reinforced the need for unity to confront the "Iranian regime's ... plans for sabotage and destruction". It should be noted that one of Riyadh's major complaints against Doha was that the latter was moving closer to Iran and Turkey, both states major rivals of the Arab bloc for regional influence.

Moreover, the establishment of relations between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel has also complicated matters, considering Tehran's long-standing opposition to Tel Aviv. Iranian leaders have said that any attack on their country will be answered with strikes on US interests in the region. Most of the Gulf monarchies host American military bases of various descriptions.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, Iran has started to enrich uranium to 20pc, while it has also seized a South Korean vessel in the Strait of Hormuz for 'causing pollution'. Apparently the Iranians are not happy with Seoul freezing billions of dollars of Tehran's funds in its banks. Considering all of



the above variables, the situation in the Gulf is highly delicate. Any attempt by the Trump administration, or its local client Israel, to confront Iran militarily is likely to have catastrophic results. While the US is clearly the superior military power, Iran has mastered asymmetrical warfare tactics in the region. Therefore, instead of beating the drums of war, the Arabs and Iran must adopt the path of dialogue to create a modus vivendi in the Mideast. Hoping for American intervention, or giving Israel a conduit in the Gulf, will bring nothing good to this volatile region.

## Reopening schools

THE government has made the difficult decision to reopen schools in phases in the coming weeks, a development which comes after educational institutions across Pakistan took an extended winter break due to rising Covid-19 cases in the country. The coronavirus incidence here is still worrying, with the number of critically ill patients in hospitals rising and daily deaths clocking in at between 50 to 80. However, neither the decision to close or to reopen schools is an easy one to make. The pandemic has disrupted the education system across the world, and many countries, such as the United Kingdom, have been forced to close schools even in the second wave. But while developed countries adapt to online learning and can continue the learning process with some modifications, in developing countries where access to computers and the internet not to mention a constant supply of electricity is a huge challenge, digital lessons are a luxury that millions of children cannot afford. Already, Pakistan has suffered immensely as a result of school closures. Although these were necessary to slow down the spread of the virus, the long-term effects of the shutting down of schools are equally if not more devastating. A few months ago, a World Bank report on Pakistan's education poverty predicted that nearly one million children would drop out of school as a result of closures and logistical issues triggered by the pandemic. Such a scenario is a blow to the young people of this country, 44pc of whom are already out of school. A spike in the dropout rate would rob young people of the opportunity to learn, grow and eventually be absorbed by the workforce — an eventuality that will have far-reaching economic and psychological effects on society.

Given these harsh realities, the government's decision to reopen schools and simultaneously keep an eye on the Covid-19 trajectory appears to be the practical way forward. The key is to mitigate transmission as much as possible in all spheres of life in order to give priority to education, so schools can remain open and the damage to learning outcomes is limited. The coming days require a careful balancing act with effective cooperation and coordination between governments, schools and the public to keep the virus to a manageable level and prevent another closure of educational institutions. Here, mass testing, training of teachers and school staff, and an effective communication system are critical.

## **Smog fallout**

THE dreaded ‘fifth season’ has arrived. A sombre grey shroud has enveloped the city of Lahore and the adjoining towns and cities, reminding the poor — once again — that no one is looking out for them. While those who can afford it might invest in precautions like air purifiers; they may be able to shut their doors and windows, etc. However, people whose livelihoods depend on them plying the roads at any time of the day and night, or those living in low-income localities next to industrial areas can do little except hope that the authorities take some measures for them to be able to, quite literally, breathe easier.

Earlier this week air quality in Lahore reached hazardous levels while during November it was recorded as approaching a shocking high of AQI500. The situation is neither new nor unexpected. For several years now, the month of December has brought, besides chilly weather, a suffocating blanket of smoke and pollutants that affects not only everyday life and movement, but also has a debilitating effect on the public’s health. In Lahore, hospitals are reporting a significant increase in allergies and respiratory illnesses. Other health problems such as smoker’s cough have become more pronounced and prevalent than before. Moreover, by inhaling pollutant-laden air, expectant mothers in low-income areas are damaging their health and also that of their unborn babies, leading to complications during pregnancy or childbirth. The Global Alliance on Health and Pollution estimated air pollution-related deaths in Pakistan to be around 128,005 in 2019, ranking third highest among the ten countries with the worst air quality. Earlier in the month, Lahore stood sixth among the world’s top ten cities with the worst air quality. (While Karachi ranked fourth, it has the advantage of being a coastal city.) The authorities need to address this issue immediately before it gets out of hand. They must devise both short- and long-term strategies for cleaning up their act so that the people of Lahore do not continue to suffer.

## **SBP report**

NEXT to the World Bank’s forecast on economic expansion in Pakistan during the present fiscal year, the State Bank’s growth projections in its flagship State of Pakistan’s Economy report for the first quarter of FY2021 will appear far too optimistic. While the World Bank’s Global Economic Prospects 2021 says Pakistan’s economy will grow by a 0.5pc this fiscal, the SBP believes that it could expand by up to 2pc — in line with the target set by the government in its budget. The central bank has tried to tamper its estimate by cautioning that the recovery faces downside risks owing to “intensification of the second wave of the pandemic”. Still, it may appear to many as the SBP’s desire to avoid stepping on the toes of the government, which is

trying to sell the recent improvement in short-term economic trends to the people as a success of its policies.

The SBP bases its growth forecast on current economic data. The recovery in economic activities is evident across the agriculture, industry and services sectors, according to the report. To support its argument, the central bank underlines the change in business confidence as reflected by an increasing demand for subsidised long-term loans for new investments. Furthermore, it adds, external and fiscal sector indicators remain favourable, showing that an emerging recovery has been achieved while keeping macroeconomic stability intact. Indeed, when examined in isolation, current trends do exhibit a turnaround in economic activities. The problem with this report, like previous ones, is that it cleverly hides the negative trends.

The SBP, for example, speaks about external account stability and improvements in its reserves, but does not discuss the costs the economy is paying for maintaining a current account surplus. Likewise, the growth in large-scale manufacturing since the inception of the present fiscal is showcased in the report to underscore an economic upturn, but it fails to inform us that industrial output remains far below the level it had achieved in the previous government's final year. Also, LSM growth remains narrow, restricted mainly to the tobacco, pharmaceuticals and cement industries. The rise in the pharmaceutical industry is attributable to the increased demand for medicines and other products owing to the pandemic, while cement sales owe mainly to the generous construction package and amnesty given on illegal money invested in the real estate sector. Most importantly, the current 'economic revival' emphasises the failure of most of the IMF-mandated policies implemented by the government and SBP before the pandemic hit. This 'turnaround' owes much to the reversal of the harsh stabilisation policies that had brought the economy grinding to a halt long before the global health crisis forced countrywide lockdowns and business shutdowns. What happens when the suspended IMF programme is restored? Will the central bank still be as overly optimistic on the country's growth prospects?

## Hazara protest

A DESPERATELY sad sequence of events is playing out yet again in Quetta. In the bitter cold of winter, thousands of Shia Hazaras — men, women and children — are staging a sit-in on a highway that runs through the city. Amidst them are the coffins of the 11 coalminers from their community who were brutally slain on Sunday in Balochistan's Bolan district.

Despite the efforts of the chief minister, several provincial ministers and some federal level government functionaries, the mourners had, until the time of writing, refused to bury their

dead and call off their protest unless the prime minister came and met them. Imran Khan in a tweet yesterday vowed he would do so “very soon” to condole with all the victims but requested them to bury their loved ones “so that their souls find peace”.

After each of the two massive suicide bombings in January and February 2013 in Quetta in which over 200 Hazaras perished, the community had also staged similar days-long sit-ins with the victims’ coffins. Each time they were targeted in sectarian attacks, they appealed to the state to protect them. They were given assurances and promises, but these amounted to little more than empty words. In certain situations they were provided security by the government, but by and large, they stepped out of their barricaded ghettos at their own peril.

In other words, the state took the easy way out. It did not take the more difficult path, which was to weed out and throw behind bars the violent extremists that often roamed free in the province, even holding rallies and openly threatening the community. Among those who have gathered in the frigid temperatures this time around, there is certainly grief, but underlying that is enormous anger.

Anger over the terrible, needless tragedies that have repeatedly befallen the persecuted Hazaras, anger over the sectarian killers who still manage to strike at will in a heavily militarised city such as Quetta and escape detection. And now the anger is spreading among the public, particularly the wider Shia community.

Protests against the massacre have spread in Karachi, with demonstrators taking to the streets for the second day running, burning tyres and wood and disrupting traffic. Having taken place after a lull, Sunday’s massacre reminds us how tenuous is the triumph over militancy. The Hazaras have suffered for too long; like the souls of their dead, the living must also find peace.

## **Women seeking divorce**

ACCORDING to a report recently published in this paper, 722pc more women from all over Sindh moved court seeking separation from their husbands in 2020 compared to the previous year. In 2019, a total of 632 family suits were filed in family courts. However, in 2020 — a year of pandemic-induced lockdowns and layoffs — this number rose to 5,198 cases, out of which 4,050 were from Karachi. The steep increase reflects how the many problems women face on the domestic front in our patriarchal society were compounded by circumstances arising from the pandemic. In fact, 2020 was a particularly difficult year for women around the world, as cases of domestic violence rose sharply in the wake of economic and social adversity triggered by Covid-19 lockdowns in a number of countries, including in the West. In the US, for instance, distress calls by women increased by as much as 30pc during the initial lockdowns.

Given that Pakistan was ranked the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women in a 2018 survey, the indirect effect of lockdowns would undoubtedly be felt far more acutely by Pakistani women, who are already marginalised and prevented from making autonomous choices about their health, safety and personal lives. According to rights groups, women from low-income households who are part of the informal workforce were most affected by domestic violence. It is unfortunate, then, that while the wellbeing of families is discussed in connection with economic hardship and mental health during the pandemic, the emotional, physical and economical plight of women is seldom taken into account. It is imperative that the authorities demonstrate commitment to upholding laws such as the Sindh Domestic Violence Act, 2013, and the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2016, and ensuring that all women have access to shelter and rehabilitative services should they seek support. Several crisis helplines were launched last year; these initiatives can only be effective if the legal aid they provide is synergised with the government's own criminal justice system.

## Anarchy in America

It was a side of America few could have imagined. As lawmakers were meeting in the Capitol — the seat of US democracy — to formally endorse the victory of President-elect Joe Biden, supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the building, broke into the premises, vandalised offices, and briefly occupied the main floor of the house itself. Shockingly, the police stood by and abstained from using force to block the assailants from gaining entry into the building.

America was aghast. So was the world. Live images beamed across the planet showed the unruly mob scaling walls, breaking down barriers, and even occupying the chair of the speaker. Many commentators on American television described the attack as an attempted coup — an unthinkable episode for a democracy as grounded and established as America's. Yet the unthinkable was unfolding live on TV and there was little the world's oldest democracy could do to protect itself from itself. Anarchy had come to America.

In the end the coup did not happen. However, America stands damaged. The images from this fateful day — delirious, abusive and aggressive men and women wrapped in stars and stripes with some donning horned Viking helmets — will remain seared in the collective American conscience for a very long time. They will remind Americans that in the arena of democratic values and beliefs, they too are mere mortals and can be felled by one swing of their own sword. These images will also haunt Americans every time they imagine themselves perched on a 'shining city on the hill' looking down upon a messy world that is unable, unwilling or



unworthy to carry the burden of democracy. Today this burden weighs heavy on America's shoulders.

Equally significantly, America will now struggle to wield the moral authority it has always used in order to weaponise its foreign policy. How will American leaders now lecture the world on high-minded values wrapped in holier-than-thou rhetoric and how will the world keep a straight face while enduring such lectures? Americans may want to prepare themselves for the sneers that will keep coming their way for a very long time.

Beyond these impending agonies lies a deeper wound that is now festering inside America's body politic; a wound that bled out the hate, vitriol and anger on display at the Capitol this Wednesday. America will need to heal itself before it attempts to heal the planet. United States today is a troubled society afflicted with a social, political and cultural sickness that has seeped deep into its folds during the last four Trump years. The new president will need to acknowledge it, diagnose it and then start to heal it. It will take a long time, but the world will wait because for all its ailments and psychological problems, America still matters to the world. Just a bit less so now.

## **Landmark verdict**

IN a landmark judgement that is being welcomed as a triumph for women's rights in the country, the Lahore High Court this week declared the two-finger 'virginity' test done on women survivors of sexual assault "illegal and against the Constitution". In a 30-page verdict, Justice Ayesha A. Malik wrote that the virginity test "offends the dignity of the female victim" and was contradictory to Article 9 and Article 14 of the Constitution, which pertain to the security and dignity of a person. Further, she declared that virginity tests are "discriminatory against the female victim as they are carried out on the basis of their gender [and] therefore offend Article 25 of the Constitution". The judgement also noted that such an examination had "no forensic value" in cases of sexual violence. The verdict is indeed an important one, for, notwithstanding that an ordinance passed by the president last year had already banned the archaic test, the verdict expands on the reasons that make it illegal. In a society where conversations around women's rights and freedoms trigger backlash and even violence, such a development is a milestone. It also underscores the judiciary's critical role when deciding cases involving sexual crimes, where elements such as forensics play a pivotal role. Significantly, Justice Malik found that the test is unscientific, offensive to personal dignity and discriminatory — a declaration that serves as a much-needed reminder that women are equal citizens and should be treated as such under the law.

While this obsolete method that humiliated and further traumatised the victims has been banned, there is more work to be done when it comes to investigating cases of sexual violence. Here, the role of medico-legal officers is key, as they carry out the detailed examination of the survivor. Not only must they be trained to gather and store evidence to forensic standards, an essential part of their education must focus on how to limit the trauma sustained by a survivor of sexual assault. Too often, women who approach the police and other law-enforcement personnel are subjected to judgemental attitudes and gaslighting. Complaints of character assassination, victim blaming and inherent bias are common. As was evidenced by the remarks of then Lahore CCPO during the ghastly motorway rape case, such attitudes are unfortunately prevalent even at the very top. It is now the responsibility of the federal and provincial governments to go further and dismantle systemic gender discrimination.

## **Mentally ill inmates**

WITH capital punishment still on the statute books, Pakistan's criminal justice system has a long way to go before it can be considered humane. That mentally ill prisoners are on death row awaiting execution is even more repugnant to human rights. The Supreme Court is at present seized with a review petition moved by three death row prisoners suffering from mental illness. They have asked the five-judge special bench to review an apex court decision from 2015, which held that the individuals had been rightly convicted, and that there were no mitigating circumstances for reduction in their sentence. Barrister Haider Rasul Mirza, as amicus curiae, offered some suggestions before the court on Wednesday that are worth considering. Among these, he proposed that prison rules be amended to provide for regular psychiatric evaluation of death row inmates to determine the state of their mental health. Barrister Mirza also suggested that the law should be amended to provide for a mental health facility in the medical wing of at least one major prison in each province.

Pakistan is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that urges countries practicing the death penalty to not impose it "on a person suffering from any mental or intellectual disabilities or to execute any such person". Capital punishment — which Dawn opposes on principle — is retributive in nature, but to carry it out on a person who cannot comprehend why he or she is being punished serves no purpose whatsoever. Ghulam Abbas, one of the aforementioned petitioners, was to be hanged in June 2019, but the Supreme Court stayed his execution — a mere two days before it was to be carried out. In October 2017, the apex court stayed the execution of another petitioner, Imdad Ali. It was while hearing his case in 2016 that the court declared that schizophrenia did not count as a legally defined mental disorder. One can only hope that the criminal justice system is moving towards a better understanding of mental disorders.

## **Ruet chief's decision**

WHILE the sighting of the moon for every new Hijri month in Pakistan is usually a quiet affair, when it comes to spotting the crescent for Ramazan and Shawwal, controversies are common. For example, there have been years when three Eids have been celebrated in the country. While the central Ruet-i-Hilal Committee — officially tasked with the duty of moon-spotting — says one thing, clerics of other self-appointed 'committees' often disagree, which results in varying dates for religious occasions. Though this problem has persisted for decades, a solution may be in sight, as the newly appointed head of the moon-sighting committee says he is willing to use scientific methods "within the limits of Sharia" to spot the crescent. Maulana Abdul Khabir, who recently replaced long-time Ruet chief Mufti Muneebur Rehman, said this on Thursday after meeting Science and Technology Minister Fawad Chaudhry. Mr Chaudhry and the previous Ruet chief, along with other clerics, had very publicly disagreed over introducing scientific methods to augment the religious duty of moon-sighting, with the men of the cloth telling the minister to keep out of religious matters.

While hardliners will likely dismiss the new Ruet chief's efforts to harmonise faith and science, the move is surely a good omen. Credit should be given to Mr Chaudhry for standing his ground over the matter, while Maulana Abdul Khabir has also shown that modern methods can complement religious requirements. Some overzealous clerics in the past have 'spotted' the moon when there was absolutely no chance of it appearing on the horizon scientifically, while others have decided to follow Saudi Arabia in the matter, which is an equally confusing solution considering the difference in time and geographical distance between the two countries. To prevent such farcical situations from arising again, clerics should be encouraged to work with the ministry in order to ensure that the nation observes Eidul Fitr and Eidul Azha on the same day countrywide, though some elements are likely to cling to their own outdated notions.

## **Loss of livelihoods**

A SPECIAL survey carried out by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics to evaluate the socioeconomic impacts of the coronavirus crisis on the wellbeing of the country's citizens is the first such attempt by any government agency to methodically assess the pandemic's effects on households, both urban and rural. Though the complete findings of the survey are yet to be released, the exercise is understood to have tried to measure the negative effects of Covid-19 on jobs, incomes, remittances, food security and health. The PBS survey has also collected information about the assets held by households to compile wealth quintiles.

The Planning Commission of Pakistan on Thursday released some details about the impact of the pandemic on employment that it believes supports the government claims of V-shaped economic recovery from the first wave of the virus outbreak, holding back the rest of the survey findings for a later release. According to the information made public so far, nearly 20.8m people — forming nearly 37.2pc of the country's total labour force consisting of 55.7m workers — suffered livelihood losses due to the shutdown of businesses and mobility restrictions enforced between April and June 2020 to halt the spread of the virus outbreak. A large majority of them — about 85pc — have since returned to work once lockdowns were lifted and the economy reopened in the wake of declining infections from their June peak. Yet a significantly large number of 3.2mn workers appear to have lost their jobs for a much longer period — if not permanently. In other words, a little less than 6pc of the total workforce — in the age group of 10 years old and above — is looking for work since the “recovery process from the impact of the plague started back in July”.

Indeed, the economy is showing some signs of recovery, no matter how fragile, since the inception of the present fiscal year. But the subdued growth prospects for FY2021 — projected to be in the range of 0.5pc to 2pc — mean that the economy is unlikely to create enough employment opportunities in the near- to medium-term to absorb the daily wage and contract/casual labour forming the vast majority of out-of-work manpower. The government is pinning a lot of hope on the revival of the construction industry to create new jobs over the next few months. Nonetheless, these hopes appear to be exaggerated in spite of a generous incentive package and tax amnesty given to the builders, developers and buyers. The intensity of the second wave of the pandemic now sweeping across most countries is also being seen by many, including the State Bank of Pakistan, as a potential threat to current recovery. If it does adversely impact what little recovery was made since last July, we may see more job losses, especially in the informal services sector and in small- to medium-sized industrial enterprises on a permanent basis.

## **Police violence**

THE removal of the IGP Islamabad is but total eyewash — a lame attempt to cover up the alleged murder of Osama Satti by the capital police in cold blood and cool down mounting public anger over police excesses.

The sincerity of the authorities to conduct a transparent inquiry into the incident and punish those policemen who were involved in the killing was exposed the moment the record of the case was ‘sealed’ to hide the glaring contradictions in different accounts of what actually

transpired on Kashmir Highway last weekend. Initial accounts allegedly show that Satti was shot dead after the counterterrorism police had him pull over his car.

In a country where rights activists, journalists, political workers and others go missing every other day — in several cases, only to eventually be discovered dead — the murder of young Satti, who the police claim had a prior criminal record, is anything but an aberration. It is not for the first time that the police have killed someone, innocent or not. They are notorious for ‘wiping out’ suspects in custody as well as in staged shootouts. Sadly, successive governments have endorsed this gruesome practice of fighting crime by looking the other way and, in many cases, rewarding the practitioners of this strategy.

Take the example of the infamous ‘encounter specialist’ Rao Anwar. Backed by all-powerful spy agencies and politicians, he rose rapidly through the ranks for allegedly killing more than 400 people in the course of his career — most notably his alleged involvement in the staged encounter killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in January 2018. Likewise, the Sahiwal counterterrorism police gunning down three family members — husband, wife and their 13-year-old daughter — and their friend in January 2019 is a memory that is still fresh in the minds of the people. The way in which the survivors and families of the deceased were brought under pressure to keep them from pursuing the case against the suspected policemen, and the manner in which their release was managed by the state, reflect how deep the rot has already gone.

Satti’s killing will test Prime Minister Imran Khan government’s commitment to reforming law enforcement in the country. So far, it hasn’t betrayed signs of any such plan. It had failed the victims’ families and the public in the Sahiwal case. Its failure now to transparently investigate Osama Satti’s killing and punish the policemen involved will further disillusion citizens

## **PDM’s way forward**

THE opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement alliance has a challenge on its hands: what to do now? After having raised expectations to fever pitch through three months of rallies and public events across the country, and after having claimed time and again that the PTI government would be ousted by January, the opposition is now in the process of shifting the goal posts. Those in the alliance who said they would boycott elections and break the electoral college for the Senate elections are today sheepishly explaining that they did not in fact mean that they would opt out of elections. Those who threatened the government of a long march in January that would drive it out of power, are now explaining that actually what they meant was that the long march would happen at the time of their choosing.

The fact is that the PDM promised more than it could deliver and now it is trying to realign its priorities in the face of some ground realities that were ignored earlier. One such reality was the PPP's extreme reluctance to boycott the Senate elections or resign from the assemblies. PML-N, JUI-F and other parties' leaderships should have acknowledged this reluctance and adjusted the alliance's position accordingly. This was not done and it led to an open fissure between the PPP and others that in turn forced the other parties to make a U-turn and agree to participate in the elections.

It will not be easy for the PDM to sustain the momentum of agitation for at least the next few months. There may yet be a long march, and the PDM parties may yet exercise the option of resigning from the assemblies despite the PPP refusing to do so, but in order for all this to happen, PDM may have to start over with a new plan, a new objective and a new resolve. Easier said than done. This is why it has to first reconcile its realpolitik approach with its ideologically driven ambitions of reforming the power equation in the system. As things stand now, PDM's narrative is a hotchpotch of conflicting aims that address individual grievances more than collective policy. In addition, the PDM parties will also need to weave some thread of logic between contesting elections and then threatening to resign. A policy of pick and choose in terms of which assemblies to resign from and which to retain control of is an approach unlikely to bolster its argument. The PDM has given itself till the end of the month for its next announcement. It may want to utilise this time to iron out its internal contradiction, knit together a cohesive plan and communicate its logic in an effective and persuasive manner. Having stumbled once, it may not have the luxury of doing so again without risking irreparable damage to its credibility.

## **Domestic violence bill**

FOR nearly a decade, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention and Protection) Bill failed to be passed by the provincial assembly. Even as all the other provinces passed their respective domestic violence bills, KP's much-needed bill was delayed due to staunch opposition — mainly from religious quarters. For instance, in 2016, the bill had been sent for review to the Council of Islamic Ideology, who rejected it on the basis of it being against religious law, or so they claimed in a press conference. Women's rights activists and female MPAs, in turn, questioned the rationale behind sending the bill to the CII to review in the first place, when this was not done with other bills, and sought clarity on which points were objectionable. Then, after the bill was again introduced to the provincial assembly in 2019, the MMA voiced reservations, delaying its passage once again. Now, according to a recent report, the revised bill is 'likely' to be passed by lawmakers in the assembly's next sitting, which is a welcome move and shows that mindsets may be changing, even if not at the pace needed. The



proposed bill's stated objective is to prevent domestic violence against women, protecting them from sexual, psychological and economic abuse, and could provide many women in the province with some degree of security against violence and exploitation, particularly within the home.

In 2013, the Sindh Assembly unanimously passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill to protect women, children, and other vulnerable groups from physical and psychological harm. In 2014, the Balochistan Assembly passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill, similar to the bill passed in Sindh in the previous year. Then, in 2016, Punjab, which is said to have the highest number of cases of violence against women, passed the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Bill 2015 amidst great jubilation. It outlined the following protection mechanisms: a district protection committee, helpline, women protection officers, shelter homes, and monetary support for victims. While these bills faced their share of criticism about their perceived shortcomings, their enactment into law is a critical step, although implementation must follow for the legislation to be effective. It is vital that KP follows in the footsteps of the other provinces, and even if we do not know all the details of the bill at this point, it is imperative that it not be a toothless one.

## **The nuclear button**

IT'S been a rough week in Washington. After a right-wing, pro-Trump mob stormed the US Capitol in an unprecedented, deadly rampage, there is more bad news for the outgoing American president. While the Democrats are preparing an impeachment motion, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has spoken to the US military's top brass to ensure an "unhinged" Donald Trump does not have access to nuclear launch codes in his last days in office. The Trump presidency has of course been known for strange happenings both domestically and on the international front, and these developments are perhaps an apt denouement to an administration that has, to put it mildly, broken quite a few taboos of American politics. Jokes aside, it is indeed a matter of concern that senior members of the American political establishment are consulting their generals to ensure a sitting president does not abuse his authority where the use of nuclear weapons is concerned.

However, the irony here is inescapable. Not too long ago Pakistan used to receive lectures from the Americans regarding the security of this country's nuclear weapons. Specifically, concerns were aired about Pakistan's nukes falling into the hands of extremist groups. While that situation has not arisen, America's political elites are now questioning their own president's competency to handle the nuclear button. Frankly, after the Capitol storming anything can be expected from the US leader and it is hoped that America's nukes remain in safe hands.

Moreover, as Joe Biden's inauguration draws closer — an event Mr Trump will not attend, again breaking with tradition — the American establishment must ensure that their outgoing leader does not indulge in any brinkmanship domestically or internationally. This includes provocations in the Middle East, specifically targeting Iran, Mr Trump's favourite foreign bogeyman, as well as other rival states such as China. While Mr Biden may not bring revolutionary changes to Washington, many Americans, and most of the rest of the world, will breathe a sigh of relief when normality returns to the White House.

## PM's visit to Quetta

AFTER nearly a week of sitting by the roadside in sub-zero temperatures with the bodies of their loved ones so cruelly murdered on Jan 3, the Shia Hazara protestors in Quetta finally laid them to rest. And, as he had promised, Prime Minister Imran Khan came to condole with them only after the burials took place on Saturday.

The government has, he said, given them written guarantees about their security and promised to address their other demands. The grieving community could do little but receive him with good grace, and hope that this time the state follows through. However, what transpired since the day the bodies of the Hazara coal miners were discovered with their throats slit and when Mr Khan visited Quetta cannot be papered over or dismissed as a 'misunderstanding'.

First the prime minister displayed an inexplicable reluctance to go to the provincial capital when the mourners said they would not bury their dead until he came to meet them in person. But worse was to come. At an event in Islamabad, Mr Khan, in a shocking display of callousness, told the persecuted community not to "blackmail" him. And he went further still, saying that a "band of crooks", referring to the opposition leaders, had "also" been blackmailing him for two-and-a-half years. Even as he spoke, the Hazara men, women and children he was addressing were spending the sixth straight day out in the freezing cold amidst the coffins, each bearing a photograph of the young man lying within.

By his thoughtless words, for which he offered no apology, the prime minister rubbed salt into the Hazaras' wounds. The community has contended with years of sectarian violence, and although the latest attack came after a lull, it was a grisly reminder that despite the state's claims of having triumphed over militancy, Shias are still being targeted for their faith. The Hazaras, with their distinctive features, are particularly vulnerable.

Some PTI leaders denounced Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari for 'doing politics' on the community's pain by going to condole with them in person. Those with an iota of political sense, not to mention empathy, know that was absolutely the need of the hour. Be that as it

may, Mr Khan now has a chance to make good on his words. Armed escorts and better-secured enclaves only address the symptoms of militancy; they are not the cure.

Going by the premier's own words, behind these attacks is a group of only about 40 individuals, former Lashkar-e-Jhangvi operatives now allied with the militant Islamic State group. The government must order the security forces to hunt down these violent extremists, who can apparently still strike at will in Balochistan, and bring them to trial. As long as they are free, they pose a threat to minorities across the country.

## **Sheer inhumanity**

IN a move that reeks of cruelty, Israel has turned down a request by the World Health Organisation and other rights groups to provide the coronavirus vaccine for Palestinian medics. The head of the WHO's mission to the Palestinians last week told a British paper that the body had requested Israel's help in providing Covid-19 vaccines for Palestinian health workers, 8,000 of whom have reportedly been infected by the virus. Unfortunately, Israel declined the request citing "shortages" — a decision that will push Palestinians into further turmoil as they grapple with an already overburdened healthcare system. Prior to the WHO plea, Amnesty International, too, had called on Israel to provide the vaccines in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, saying that the Jewish state was obligated to do so under international law. The group said Israel needed to stop ignoring its international obligations as an occupying power and "immediately act to ensure that Covid-19 vaccines are equally and fairly provided to Palestinians living under its occupation".

That these requests have either been ignored or denied by Israel points to the occupying power's sheer inhumanity when it comes to Palestinians, as well as an utter lack of respect for their own obligations. Already pressed due to an ongoing blockade in place since 2007, Palestinian healthcare personnel are struggling far more than many others in this pandemic. The blockade includes prohibitions on "dual use materials" that may be used for both civilian and military purposes. However, the denial of items not connected to security has had an enormously negative impact on the health of residents in Gaza. Authorities in Palestine have acknowledged their limited capacity to contain the spread of coronavirus due to a shortage of medical equipment, a scenario which is almost unimaginable given how poorly even the sophisticated healthcare systems in Europe have fared when faced with a high incidence of Covid-19 cases. In this situation, it is deeply disappointing and criminally negligent of Israeli authorities to deny the Palestinians help on the vaccination drive. Their position is especially inhumane given that news reports have named Israel as being the country with the fastest vaccine rollout programme, with over 12pc of their population already vaccinated. As Israel

celebrates this milestone, it is clear that it values the lives of Israeli citizens and Palestinian residents of Jerusalem far more than the nearly five million Palestinians who live under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

## **Murder in Muzaffargarh**

THERE is no dearth of horrific news. On Thursday, two minor girls died when they were set on fire inside their home in Muzaffargarh, while their siblings were rushed to the hospital, covered in burns. While the full details of the case are not known at this point, according to the report on Friday the suspect sought revenge on the girls' father over a 'marriage dispute'; his daughter had recently been divorced by the children's father on the orders of a village council. It seems likely that the suspect saw the divorce as a stain on his family, a 'dishonour' akin to death, and killed the girls in order to 'punish' the father. But all these decisions were made and followed by men — what was the children's fault?

While the suspect and his accomplices have been taken into custody, the brutal incident is just another in a long list of violent acts against children that are scattered through the daily newspapers — from corporal punishment inside schools, madressahs and homes, to kidnapping, sexual abuse and underage marriages. According to rights' groups, the abuse of children has only intensified with the coronavirus pandemic. In August 2020, based on a close monitoring of national and regional newspapers, the NGO Sahil released its statistics on child abuse. The results show that over eight children were sexually abused each day, on average, in the first half of the previous year — and these of course were only the reported cases. The highest incidence was in Punjab, where more than half of all the incidents took place. As a society, we have become so accustomed to everyday acts of violence and barbarism that such cases — a stark illustration of the depths of depravity rooted in male entitlement — barely garner any attention in the mainstream. The rest of society simply goes about their day, finding some form of distraction or the other, anything to keep them from looking at the horrific realities all around them, particularly against women and children.

## **What next in cricket?**

WITH Pakistan's catastrophic New Zealand tour, cricket in the country is yet again at a crossroads. The challenging tour, where the tourists received a thorough drubbing in the T20s as well as the Test series, laid bare the team's many weaknesses. The batting was abysmal, the bowling lacked incisiveness and the fielding was an embarrassment as usual. There was a huge gap between the playing standards of the two sides, especially in the Test series where Pakistan

failed to show a spirit of competition. The overall performance, in fact, was an aberration from the tall pre-tour claims made by head coach Misbah-ul-Haq and bowling coach Waqar Younis. The selection, too, left a lot to be desired. The experienced team management, regretfully, could not come out with any definitive strategy to counter the hosts' onslaught. Even though armed with an unprecedentedly large squad of 35, Misbah & Co showed no flair or courage to make the right changes at the right time. Faltering top-order batsmen such as Shan Masood and Haris Sohail retained their places after the first Test debacle; the toothless bowling combination, too, got the management's nod for the second Test with only debutant Zafar Gohar coming in for leggie Yasir Shah, a move that backfired. Talented fast bowlers Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Sohail Khan and a few other remained on the sidelines as Pakistan's lacklustre bowling attack collapsed.

The PCB's cricket committee is set to review the team's performance in a crucial meeting today and both Misbah and Waqar have been asked to attend. Not known to take many far-sighted decisions, the PCB regime is unlikely to deviate from its policy of 'playing safe'. But with the South Africa series at home all set to commence in a week's time, the defensive approach adopted by Pakistan cricket will not be a wise thing. The PCB and the team would be well advised to play positive, aggressive cricket in the series and induct some new faces which could save them from embarrassment.

## **Power blackout**

THE electricity blackout that plunged the entire country into darkness late Saturday night is a stark reminder of all that is wrong with our crumbling power sector: poor governance and an incompetent power bureaucracy. The government has suspended seven employees of the Guddu power plant, which is said to be the original source of tripping that cascaded through the entire system leading to the automatic shutdown of generation plants in less than a second. It has also ordered an eyewash of an inquiry, but will not be able to hide the long-standing issues plaguing the power sector.

According to a report in this paper, the three key companies concerned — the Central Power Generation Company (that operates the Guddu plant), NTDC and the National Power Control Centre — have been operating without permanent heads. The post of managing director, NTDC, for example, has not been filled for the last three and a half years. That is not all. Ever since the government started implementing power-sector reforms in the early 1990s, the top jobs in public-sector companies have been handed to the all-knowing PAS officers and, in certain cases, serving or retired generals, replacing the professionals who should have been running the show.

Little wonder the sector has rapidly decayed under those who know nothing of technical issues, causing the accumulation of a debt of over Rs2.3bn, increased T&D losses, electricity theft, lower bill collection, lack of transparency and poor governance.

Power outages and breakdowns are not uncommon in countries. There can be multiple reasons — human, technological, environmental, etc — for such occurrences. But the increasing frequency of such happenings in Pakistan of late should be cause for concern. Although the PTI set-up has tried to blame the latest breakdown on lack of investment in the T&D network by its predecessors, especially the PML-N, there are questions it must answer. How come a system which transports nearly 24,000 MW of electricity without any problem during summer is not good enough to transmit less than half the amount in winter? There has to be some other reason for that.

The government must realise that political point-scoring will not help. It isn't for the first time that a fault at the Guddu power station has triggered a massive blackout. There have been many such instances, mostly during winters. The fault lies in the way that decisions are made in the power sector, giving more weightage to generation costs (by supplying cheaper electricity to meet the demand of Punjab and KP from the power plants located in Sindh and Balochistan) rather than heeding professional advice. There can be different ways of fixing the poorly managed power sector. But all solutions to the present power muddle anticipate taking power-sector jobs from the bureaucrats and giving them back to those who have been trained for them — and with the freedom to take decisions.

## Mass testing

IN the past week, Pakistan crossed the half-million mark for Covid-19 cases in the country. After a spike in deaths and heightened positivity ratios over several weeks, we are now seeing a slowdown. Still, daily Covid-19-related deaths are clocking in between 30 and 50, with new infections between 1,500 and 3,000. Although we have statistically fared better than many Western countries and even some regional states, our data has been historically weak due to low testing. This unfortunate half-a-million milestone in the pandemic, coupled with a death toll of over 10,000, could have been much lower.

From the start of the pandemic, Pakistan's daily total testing has been very low. In the early days, the government had vowed to reach the target of 100,000 daily tests, but failed to live up to its pledge. At its highest, daily countrywide testing has been around 50,000, that too for a few days. In the past week, daily testing has been 35,000-45,000 — a sorry figure considering the sheer size of our population. At 32 tests per 1,000, Pakistan's per capita testing is lower



than Iran and India that clock in at 95 and 129 respectively. The entire point of increased testing is to test everyone, even those who may be unaware that they are infected, so that they can isolate themselves and prevent the virus from spreading to others in their community. With low testing, we have entered a data fog, which essentially means that decisions are being made on the basis of weak information. In the past, officials have claimed people are reluctant to get tested and that the demand is low, a scenario which points to a failure in public messaging on Covid-19. As the government prepares to reopen schools and universities, it must ramp up testing. A mass testing strategy is more critical now than before, as it will accurately identify which areas are Covid-19 hotspots. Based on this information, the authorities can make data-led decisions regarding the enforcement of targeted lockdowns in specific schools or localities. The current testing is far too low, given the unrestricted public activity and mass gatherings in the country. The government must make tests available and accessible, if it wants to limit the loss to lives and livelihoods. No doubt, there are countries which have had far worse trajectories, but we must strive to be like those who have performed at least reasonably well and not compare ourselves to the worst.

## Military's role

ISPR SPOKESMAN Maj Gen Babar Iftikhar has said what any individual in his position would have been expected to say. After all, the Constitution clearly defines the functions of the army, namely to “defend Pakistan against external aggression or threat of war, and, subject to law, act in aid of civil power when called upon to do so”.

The fundamental law of this country also holds that “The federal government shall have control and command of the armed forces”. It was thus scarcely surprising when, at a presser on Monday, the senior military official robustly countered the contention of the opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement alliance that it is meddling in politics. “The army does not need to enter the political fray, nor should it be dragged into it,” he asserted.

Both the weight of history and prevailing currents alike belie these words. Even a cursory acquaintance with Pakistan's history is enough to convey the extent of the military's role in running the country, sometimes directly through coups that swept aside elected governments. At other times, it was enough to call the shots from behind weak civilian dispensations — the ‘civ-mil imbalance’ is a truism, not a figment of the imagination.

As the first ever transfer of power took place from one elected government to the next in 2013, it seemed that democracy was at last being consolidated. However, the ground was not going to be ceded easily, and institutional boundaries continued to be breached. The most visible

example of this was presented by the denouement of the Faizabad dharna, staged in November 2017 during the PML-N's last tenure by a violent mob of religious activists near Islamabad.

After causing mayhem that gave the impression of a government no longer in control, the rioters dispersed only after an army-brokered agreement. A video clip caught the DG Punjab Rangers distributing cash among them for 'travel expenses'.

On Monday, Maj Gen Iftikhar, in a repudiation of the PDM's allegation that the establishment had engineered the 2018 election, also mentioned the army's support in the nationwide exercise. Again unsurprisingly, he depicted its role as having been in the nature of necessary security assistance.

However, international election observers reported significant problems with the entire process that queered the pitch to the disadvantage of the incumbent PML-N government in particular. The chorus alleging military meddling in politics, even daily governance, has risen to a crescendo since then. The fact that several major civilian institutions and bodies are headed by uniformed personnel has further sharpened the perception of a 'hybrid government'.

It is no longer enough to repeat stock phrases. If it wishes to rise above the fray and remain untainted by the hurly-burly of politics, the security establishment must take tangible measures to disengage itself from it. Remain on the same page as the government, but in a separate column.

## **Debate, not ordinances**

LAW Minister Farogh Naseem has defended the frequent use of presidential ordinances in parliament, saying it is something that is not illegal. Speaking in the Senate, the law minister lamented the opposition's non-cooperation over legislation, and said that even legislation dealing with issues of national interest had to be taken to a joint session of parliament. His line of argument is unfortunate. Justifying the excessive use of ordinances for legislation does not reflect well on the government. It points to a certain parliamentary insecurity that suggests that the government does not want to put in the effort to muster support for its legislation by engaging the opposition and trying to persuade it on the merits of the bill, or to garner sufficient traction on the floor of the house through an informed debate. Issuing an ordinance bypasses these processes and also dilutes the efficacy of parliament. As it is, the performance of this parliament has left a lot to be desired. Since its first day it has been plagued with conflict. On the floor of both the National Assembly and the Senate, legislation has been

subsumed under a deluge of political noise. Prime Minister Imran Khan — despite having committed himself to regular attendance and participation in question hour — has opted to remain absent, thereby signalling a de-prioritisation of parliament as a whole. This has taken a toll on the performance of parliament. Political discourse has now shifted away from this central platform to more visible avenues such as rallies, press conferences and television talk shows. The parliamentary committees may have fared slightly better, but not by much. Here too the serious work of discussing, debating and drafting bills has often fallen victim to partisan politicking. The result has been a dilution of legislation.

After the Senate elections in March, it is expected the government will have a majority in both houses, which means it will be in a comfortable position to get its laws passed and would have no need to resort to ordinances, which must in any case be strongly discouraged. But even if its numbers increase in parliament, the government would be well advised to review the principles of democracy which rest not only on majority consensus but also on genuine debate and engagement with those who have a different viewpoint. It is only by reaching out across the aisle that the government can gain deeper knowledge of how a particular law would benefit the electorate.

## Houthis' designation

YEMEN'S Houthi movement, also known as Ansarullah, is one of the primary political players in that country, also boasting a powerful armed wing. Principally representing the country's northern Zaidi Shia tribes, it has been in the thick of Yemen's civil war, as well as the confrontation with the Saudi-led coalition that began in 2015. Widely seen as an Iranian ally in the Arabian Peninsula, the movement captured the capital Sana'a in 2014 and soon thereafter sent Yemen's government packing, causing the Saudis to intervene. While the Houthis have been front and centre in the numerous conflicts facing Yemen, it is difficult to agree with the Trump administration's recent move to declare the movement a foreign terrorist organisation. This is exactly what the White House intends to do next week, on Donald Trump's last day in office. It is unclear what the logic behind the move is, other than to present a parting gift to the House of Saud.

The move has attracted criticism from within the US as well as internationally. The UN says the designation is "likely to have serious humanitarian and political repercussions" while some American lawmakers have also opposed the move. The fact is that branding the Houthis as terrorists will have very little, if any, impact on ending the Yemeni conflict. While it is difficult to agree with many of their tactics, the group's political wing has strong roots in northern Yemen — the Zaidi Imam at one time ruled the country — and disenfranchising a whole community is

likely to further complicate an already tangled situation. Therefore, it is hoped the Biden administration takes practical steps to end the war in this impoverished country. This can primarily be achieved by letting the Saudis know that America favours a negotiated settlement rather than an endless cycle of violence. Millions of Yemenis are suffering from chronic hunger and disease; what they need is an immediate end to this destructive war and the rebuilding of their lives and country.

## **Broadsheet's 'revelations'**

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan is only partly correct in his assertion that the revelations by the UK-based firm, Broadsheet LLC, expose the "massive scale of our ruling elite's corruption and money laundering". The interview given by the company's owner, Kaveh Moussavi, to a YouTube news channel also reveals the sham that has been the exercise of accountability in Pakistan. Mr Moussavi has made a number of assertions in his interview.

Among these is that an individual purporting to be former premier Nawaz Sharif's nephew offered Broadsheet a \$25m bribe to drop the probe into the Sharif family's assets. Mr Moussavi also claimed to possess proof of corruption against a number of other Pakistanis. Mr Khan has formed an inter-ministerial committee to look into the matter and make the names of the individuals public.

Whatever the merits of Mr Moussavi's claims, and some of them seem scarcely credible, he certainly appears to be a publicity seeker. Otherwise why stir the pot after so long? After all, it was back in 2000 that Broadsheet was hired by Gen Musharraf's government to work with the newly set up NAB to track down Pakistanis' ill-gotten wealth stashed overseas; the contract was terminated in 2003. Perhaps he is also hoping for a similar arrangement with the PTI government.

Certainly, probing white-collar corruption and money laundering is a laudable aim. Done with integrity, it strengthens institutions, improves governance and bolsters the citizens' faith in the justice system. But when accountability is done selectively, giving some the benefit of the doubt while proceeding full throttle against others on thin evidence, if any at all, it corrodes the system still further. That unfortunately is the kind of 'accountability' we have been witness to in Pakistan for decades.

It is this country's misfortune that, under NAB, accountability has become a handmaiden to political expediency and short-term gains. Among Mr Moussavi's claims, the least startling are the ones about how NAB dropped investigations into high-profile corruption suspects after deals were struck with them, or took them off its list of 'targets' if those individuals came back

into political favour. For, despite all the clamour in the lead-up to the 2018 election about bringing the corrupt to book, accountability under the PTI appears a lot like it did before — a political witch-hunt. Some credible exposés have oddly enough not even merited an inquiry by NAB.

No less than the Supreme Court has assailed the organisation for its blatantly biased approach, noting that it “seems reluctant in proceeding against people on one side of the political divide even in respect of financial scams of massive proportion while those on the other side are being arrested and incarcerated for months and years without providing any sufficient cause”. Despite this, NAB continues as before, trampling on constitutional rights without any apparent fear of itself being held to account.

## **Afghan dialogue**

AS the Afghan Taliban and the government in Kabul try and reach a modus vivendi in Doha, it is essential that the level of violence is brought down to allow the peace process to succeed. This point was stressed by Pakistan’s civil and military leadership on Tuesday when prominent Afghan Hazara leader Ustad Karim Khalili called on both the prime minister and army chief during his visit to Islamabad. The comments are particularly important considering the history of bad blood between Afghanistan’s Hazara community and the Taliban. The latter were responsible for the 1998 massacre of hundreds, possibly thousands, of mostly Hazara victims in Mazar-i-Sharif; it is unlikely that memories of that atrocity have faded. However, if Afghanistan is to prosper, it must look forward while acknowledging its painful past. That is why the talks in Doha are so crucial. Afghan factions can talk to foreign forces all they want, but the fact remains that peace in that country is unlikely unless the Afghans talk to each other in a spirit of reconciliation and accommodation — all the more reason why violence from all sides, particularly the Taliban, needs to stop if the talks are to succeed.

Ever since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — and even before that — the country has been in a constant state of conflict. The communist, Mujahideen and Taliban eras were all marked by conflict and upheaval, retarding Afghanistan’s growth and forcing millions of Afghans to flee their homeland. Now, at a time when foreign forces are poised to leave, Afghan stakeholders have two choices before them: they can take advantage of the situation and work out a plan to share power and help establish a democratic system in which the interests of all ethnicities and sects, as well as women and minorities, are protected, or they can continue to battle it out and prolong the endless nightmare of the Afghan people. As for the Kabul elite, they need to put on a united front and discard internal factional divisions for the sake of harmony. For their part, the Taliban must join the political process. If their violent actions

continue, it is highly unlikely that an intra-Afghan peace process can succeed. And with virulent militant actors such as the self-styled Islamic State group waiting in the wings to pounce, all Afghan forces must realise the importance of a negotiated settlement as soon as possible.

## Polio dangers

IN the first incident of its kind this year, a policeman guarding polio vaccinators was gunned down in KP's Karak district. Earlier last month, a similar killing took place in Bannu district when gunmen attacked an assistant sub-inspector who was returning to the police station after providing security to polio workers. At times, it seems that the battle against extremist mindsets is harder than the battle against poliovirus. No one would feel this more acutely than the thousands of polio workers — and those protecting them. Yet, they courageously keep coming back to this long-drawn fight when they are called, putting themselves in danger each time. At present, polio teams in the country are engaged in a five-day national immunisation drive. With the raging Covid-19 pandemic, however, their job has become even more difficult. Polio immunisation was halted for more than four months in the first half of 2020 as a precautionary step against the spread of Covid-19 — meaning that many children could not be inoculated against polio. This situation was aggravated because of the aggressive resurgence of the polio virus since 2019. Meanwhile, the attacks on polio teams in KP show there is still much resistance to polio vaccination thanks to fallacious theories. The result is that thousands of children are not vaccinated against the crippling disease. Suspicious mindsets are perhaps the biggest impediment to polio eradication in the country.

Though successive governments have promised to end the curse of polio, their efforts are more for show as structural and consistent steps towards this goal are not taken. Earlier, the prime minister had stated that it was a “shame” that Pakistan was one of two countries where polio was still endemic. If the government is sincere about overcoming the challenge, it should immediately start working towards rooting out the sources of misinformation regarding the vaccine and persuade our elected representatives to personally engage in raising awareness and addressing the concerns of those resisting immunisation for their children.

# Trump's impeachment

IN a dramatic development, the United States House of Representatives has impeached outgoing President Donald Trump and sent the impeachment resolution to the Senate to convict him. Given the numbers in the Senate and the little time left before Mr Trump bows out of the White House, the impeachment move may well remain symbolic in nature. Even then, the symbolism itself is a potent one. As are the words.

The impeachment resolution says: "President Trump gravely endangered the security of the United States and its institutions of government. He threatened the integrity of the democratic system, interfered with the peaceful transition of power, and imperilled a coequal branch of government. He thereby betrayed his trust as president, to the manifest injury of the people of the United States." Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi too did not hold back as she opened the debate: "We know that the president of the United States incited this insurrection, this armed rebellion against our common country. He must go. He is a clear and present danger to the nation."

It is clear that President Trump's actions have elicited alarm and criticism within Republican ranks too. This may lead some Republicans to vote against him in the Senate. While Mr Trump retains a large and committed base of supporters, many among the Republican party rank and file may have realised, perhaps too late, that their blind support may have contributed to his reckless actions. Few could have imagined that one day the president of the US would be responsible for an insurrection at the Capitol — the temple of American democracy — and five people would lose their lives. Yet this is what the outgoing president has reduced America to — a democracy threatened from within and ridiculed from abroad.

There is a lesson for the American voter — in fact, for voters everywhere — about the repercussions of electing a person without considering the consequences of their choice. The US boasts a democratic system built on the concept of checks and balances where power is shared among institutions as well as between Washington and the states. If in such a structured system one person can use the powers bestowed upon him through his office to run amok, weaker democracies are much more susceptible to manipulation and abuse of power.

Voters may also need to keep in mind that a democratic mandate is not always a free pass. Leaders elected to office must always be kept under constitutional check otherwise they can use the weight of their office — and of their mandate — to force through policies that may be detrimental to a society's health. The US media has played a critical role these last four years to keep Mr Trump under pressure by speaking truth to power. It has called out the president for his excesses despite pressures. Therein lies another lesson for us all.



# Economic growth

MOODY'S Investors Service expects Pakistan's economy to grow by a modest 1.5pc in FY2021, much higher than the World Bank's projection of 0.5pc but lower than the government's target of 2.1pc and the State Bank's estimates of 1.5pc to 2.5pc. Unlike the World Bank that recently predicted the country's growth would remain lacklustre even over the next two fiscal years at just 1.3pc, the research arm of Moody's Credit Rating Agency sees the economy expanding to 4.4pc in FY2022. The wide divergence in growth projections for the present year is not surprising as these are based mainly on different sets of data and policies, short- to medium-term trends, global economic drifts and other variables. Yet a reading of the texts accompanying the differing forecasts underlines the challenge to the subdued recovery from the Covid-19 shock: resurgence of the virus. Even though short-term macroeconomic trends are showing improvements over the last year when the economy contracted by 0.4pc for the first time in 68 years, Moody's expects economic activities to remain below pre-Covid-19 levels for some time and vulnerable to successive waves of infection.

The agency says the perceived risks to Pakistan's economy are lower than for similarly rated peers, as it is a relatively closed economy with lower dependence on exports and private capital flows, besides limited trade and supply chain linkages which reduce its exposure to weaker global demand. But this 'advantage' will also prove to be a major snag even after the world recovers from the pandemic. The slow economic revival may hurt government finances, as is reflected by the FBR missing its target for the first half of FY2021, with Moody's anticipating the budget deficit at 8pc of GDP compared to the target of 7pc. The agency acknowledges that different initiatives and fiscal stimulus packages given by the government and the central bank helped put the macroeconomy back on the growth track but did not fully offset the pandemic's impact on the economy. That means private credit growth will reach only a modest 5pc to 7pc, with banks facing the prospect of rising defaults from companies and households because of economic hardship amid the pandemic when repayment of rescheduled loans becomes due in the next few months. In other words, it isn't time for the government to declare victory; rather, it is time to tweak policies and undertake structural reforms to help the economy get back on its feet on a sustainable basis.

## **Madressah students**

GETTING students of madressahs involved in politics is a bad idea, primarily because seminarians should be concentrating on their studies, while their involvement in politics is bound to radicalise the political discourse. This is why the prime minister's orders to Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid to prevent students of madressahs from joining the PDM's scheduled march on Islamabad is a good idea. However, it is also true that the move smacks of hypocrisy as when Imran Khan — then a fiery member of the opposition — was besieging the federal capital in 2014, he himself had a bit of help from religious elements. It should be remembered that supporters of cleric-politician Tahirul Qadri, in their thousands, had staged an 'Inquilab' march and dharna, coinciding with the PTI's protest campaign in Islamabad. Many of Mr Qadri's supporters were students of madressahs and schools affiliated with the cleric's religious and political organisations, though at that time Mr Khan did not seem to mind the inclusion of seminary students in politics. Where the current PDM protests are concerned, the head of the Deobandi waqf that administers that school of thought's seminaries has denied students will participate in political activities of the JUI-F, one of the central component parties of the anti-government alliance and the leading Deobandi political force in the country.

It should be noted that in the Pakistani context, where religion and politics are almost inseparable, it would be next to impossible to implement any restriction on seminarians participating in political activities. For example, religious parties — such as the JUI-F, Jamaat-i-Islami and more recently Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan — command tremendous street power, and other 'secular' political forces are at times also keen to tap into this reserve of ready recruits for political events. Ideally, as stated above, madressah students should focus on their education, while political elements should not try and exploit this segment of society to achieve their goals. This applies to parties staging protests now, as well as those who have leveraged these resources in the past.

## **British MP on IHK**

DESPITE sustained efforts by New Delhi's rulers to remove India-held Kashmir from the global discourse, people of conscience everywhere are discussing the situation in the occupied region, particularly after the Indian government made its controversial move to strip IHK of its autonomy in August 2019.

One of the most eloquent statements in defence of the Kashmiri people of late has come from the UK, where Labour MP Sarah Owen made a strong speech to highlight IHK's plight in

Westminster Hall. The lawmaker from Luton North raised arguments that demolish India's dubious claim of being the world's largest democracy. As Ms Owen rightly pointed out, the lockdown in occupied Kashmir is about "control", while also mentioning disturbing reports of Kashmiri women and girls being raped.

Questioning her own government, which often raises issues of women's rights, the MP asked if London's "actions match the rhetoric", with reference to held Kashmir. Moreover, discussing alleged mistreatment of Muslim Uighurs in China's Xinjiang area, which the UK has criticised unambiguously, Ms Owen asked her government if it would take a similar stance on Kashmir.

The British lawmaker deserves kudos for highlighting atrocities in IHK that many other self-proclaimed champions of human rights prefer to remain silent on. India's slick public relations and media machinery — particularly its more jingoistic private media outlets — often go full throttle to whitewash New Delhi's dubious deeds in held Kashmir, mostly by trying to tar the Kashmiri freedom movement with the brush of terrorism.

However, the fact is that under India's brutal siege it is common Kashmiri men, women and children who are suffering. Patients cannot be admitted to hospitals, students are deprived of education while young men live under the constant shadow of death, afraid that they will be termed 'militants' and gunned down by India's military enforcers. Perhaps if more persons in power, particularly in the West, had the courage to call out India for its atrocious behaviour in IHK, New Delhi could be forced to rethink its brutal approach.

## Gas liberalisation

AFTER drawing much criticism from both consumers and the opposition over its mismanagement of the energy sector that has resulted in crippling gas shortages this winter and expensive LNG imports, the government appears to have sped up its efforts to liberalise the gas market with the induction of private companies. On Thursday, Ogra permitted two firms to 'build virtual (gas) pipelines' to supply imported LNG to large industrial consumers including textile mills and fertiliser plants, power producers, CNG owners and others in or outside the networks of the two state-owned gas utilities. These companies will import their cargo through Gwadar and Karachi before transporting it to customers across the country in bowsers. A couple of days before, the regulator had issued gas marketing licences to two other companies to build their own LNG terminals. Until they complete their terminals, which will not be before at least 2023, these firms will use the excess RLNG handling capacity of the two existing terminals at Port Qasim. Both terminals have a combined capacity of handling 1.3bcfd

of LNG with 1.2bcfd of it underwritten by the government, which pays hefty capacity charges to the terminal operators, mostly without utilising the capacity.

By selling its unutilised capacity to private marketing companies, especially during summers when residential gas demand is at its lowest, the government would be able to save a lot of money in capacity payments to terminal operators. That will help it reduce the consumer price of LNG and cut its losses on subsidy at the same time. Besides, the liberalisation of the gas market is expected to encourage competition and boost economic growth by ensuring reliable supplies of energy to industrial and other consumers of imported fuel. The involvement of private parties in the gas sector will make imports cheaper and more efficient, leading to the availability of LNG at competitive prices to customers. Moreover, with the end of state monopoly the loss of good customers may prod public-sector gas firms into becoming efficient and force them to work towards reducing system losses and theft. In view of the expected increase in LNG imports, both terminal operators have already started implementing their plans to enhance their capacity to accommodate private importers as more investors are showing an active interest in setting up new RLNG facilities and/or marketing gas in the country.

Competition is a healthy thing but the induction of the private sector does not automatically guarantee trickledown benefits to consumers. Private importers and marketing companies will be tempted to cartelise or indulge in other such practices to make quick money as in other sectors. Hence, strong regulations and vigilant regulatory bodies are needed to govern the market and protect consumers. Ogra's failure to streamline the petroleum market and protect consumers underscores the need for urgent regulatory reforms in the oil and gas sector for an efficient and competitive energy market.

## Osama Satti inquiry

THE findings of the judicial inquiry into the Jan 2 killing of 21-year-old Osama Satti in Islamabad merely confirms what observers and the victim's family have been saying all along: Osama Satti was murdered in cold blood by personnel of the Islamabad police on Srinagar Highway. The report states that the level of brute force used by the policemen who shot the young man implies that their intention was to kill, rather than neutralise a threat. "Osama's body lay on the road while police vehicles surrounded it to keep the matter hidden from the public. Instead of shifting the body to the hospital, the officials kept it on the road. It appears as if they waited for Osama to die," it states. Contrary to official claims, the report reveals that Satti was killed by police personnel who fired at least 22 times from standing or sitting positions. The report also exposes the extent to which law enforcers went to cover up their colleagues' brutal actions — from attempting to destroy evidence to giving the wrong address to Rescue 1122 and asking it

to return. All this shows that police control was also compromised and ended up abetting the murderers. What is most lamentable, however, is that such revelations do not come as a shock any longer. There is a long list of victims across the country who have paid the ultimate price at the hands of the country's trigger-happy security people. Only four months ago, in Turbat, a young student, Hayat Baloch, was dragged out from a date farm by FC men, shot and left to die, as a reaction to an IED attack on the security personnels' vehicle. All this took place in front of his father, who pleaded to no avail that his son had been harvesting dates with him all day. Then there are the families of the more than 400 people killed allegedly by 'encounter specialist' Rao Anwar who await justice, as do the families of the innocent passengers targeted by the CTD in Sahiwal.

Though the speedy removal of several police personnel has been described as "encouraging" by Satti's father, it remains to be seen whether this damning judicial report makes an impact on the overall professionalism of law enforcement officers. Unless such delinquent security personnel are tried and punished for the murders they commit, these brutal excesses will continue to plague the country.

## **Vaccine procurement**

ALL eyes are on the government as it pledges to roll out the Covid-19 vaccination programme to about 80m citizens by the first quarter of 2021. On several occasions, officials have said that Pakistan will kick off the vaccine drive in phases in March and that the target population will be inoculated by November this year. Given that the government is yet to procure the vaccine from the multiple manufacturers it is engaged in discussions with, this is a challenging plan. At present, the government is in talks with multiple entities, including Chinese pharmaceutical companies Sinopharm and CanSino, whose vaccines have been under trial in Pakistan. Yesterday, an announcement from Drap indicated that the Oxford vaccine AstraZeneca, too, has been approved for procurement. Aside from these, Pakistan is also eligible to receive free vaccines under the Covax programme which procures the vaccine for less-developed countries with the goal of equitable distribution. While these are promising signs, the big test ahead for the government still looms as an official order has yet to be placed and March is less than a month and a half away. Given the global demand for vaccines, and the priorities of these pharma companies to supply to their own countries first, the government's pledge to start vaccinating the population in the first quarter appears ambitious. Even if approvals have come, orders are yet to be placed. Here, Pakistan's low investment in the fields of biotechnology and education is evident. It means that we, unlike India, will not be able to manufacture the vaccine, and will therefore not only vaccinate our population later than others but also not generate any revenue during the exercise.

Beyond procurement and supply, the other major challenge for the government will be effective distribution through an uninterrupted programme. Logistics, effective communication and upholding the best medical practices will play a key part in a successful programme. Disinformation and propaganda about the Covid-19 vaccination is at an all-time high, as social media and private messaging groups are flooded with false information and fear-mongering content that can dissuade people from taking the jab. As it makes efforts to bring the vaccine to Pakistan, the government must also simultaneously have a roll-out plan. Improved inter-provincial coordination sans politics, too, will play a pivotal role here as both the federal and provincial governments, especially Sindh, should focus on the common goal despite their political differences.

## **Foreign funding case**

THE Election Commission of Pakistan has summoned both the PML-N and PPP on Monday in connection with the foreign funding case. Both parties have been issued notices to appear before the scrutiny committee and present their defence.

The appearance will take place a day before the previously scheduled demonstration in front of the ECP offices by the Pakistan Democratic Movement opposition alliance, which is aiming to highlight the delay in concluding the foreign funding case against the ruling PTI. This case has been dragging on for more than six years without reaching a final judgement. The case pertains to allegations that the PTI has taken funds from dubious, prohibited and illegal sources which, if proven, can lead to severe consequences for the party.

For its part, the PTI's lawyers have launched multiple attempts over the years to question the jurisdiction of the ECP over this matter. These petitions have been dismissed at various platforms and the ECP has maintained that it is fully within its jurisdiction to demand an explanation from the PTI about its sources of funding. It has formed a scrutiny committee to go over all the documents presented in order to reach a final conclusion. The PTI has also challenged the source of funding for the PML-N and PPP and their case is also in front of the ECP. The PDM is now demanding that the ECP bring the case against the PTI to a final conclusion.

At one point, the ECP had itself decided to fast-track the hearings but then the pace slowed over the previous year and the scrutiny of evidence was kept pending with each successive hearing. Therefore, the demand to complete the hearing and make a decision are justified. All parties have been given ample time to argue their case. There is no reason the issue should be dragged any further. As the ruling party, the PTI must display transparency in terms of proving

the bona fides of its funding sources. If it has nothing to hide, or has done nothing wrong as it claims, then it has no reason to ask for more time or resort to delaying tactics. It should produce all bank statements and account details as demanded by the ECP and substantiate its claims that all its sources of funds are above board, fully declared and legal.

## Makli ‘renovation’

THERE are fears that the recently conducted ‘renovation’ work carried out at the Makli necropolis may rob the historical site of its World Heritage status. A report in this paper has cited the concerns of archaeologists and conservationists that the shoddy so-called renovation carried out on a number of old graves, especially the magnificent mausoleum of Isa Khan Turkhan-II, governor of Thatta from 1627 to 1644, may lead Unesco to remove Makli — which, with its half a million graves, is considered to be one of the world’s oldest burial grounds — from its list of World Heritage Sites. Experts believe that the work — which should have been more an exercise in expert preservation — has disfigured the fine craftsmanship of the tombs. Unfortunately, for a number of years, the necropolis has been left at the mercy of the elements and thieves who sold tomb carvings to make a quick profit. Unesco experts have been carrying out annual inspections of the site, and for at least the past two years they have been asking the authorities to carry out conservation work as per international guidelines on some badly damaged tombs. The UN body has also repeatedly warned Pakistan that if adequate conservation work is not carried out in Makli, the graveyard might lose its heritage status.

Tragically, the provincial government has an appalling record when it comes to the preservation of historical sites in Sindh. For instance, experts have complained that the Sindh government’s efforts to conserve the 4,500-year-old city of Mohenjo Daro have only accelerated the existing damage to its ancient brick structures. As if ignoring theft and weather- and terrain-related damage to heritage sites were not enough, the officials of the Sindh antiquities department have made matters worse by hiring evidently incompetent people who have caused further harm to invaluable historical assets. The question is: do the authorities intend to rectify the situation, or will they allow Sindh’s history to crumble into oblivion as they helplessly look on?



# More ignominy for PIA

ANOTHER ignominious chapter has opened in the wretched saga of the national flag carrier. On Friday, it was learnt that a PIA Boeing 777 had been seized at Kuala Lumpur airport on the orders of a Malaysian court in a \$14m lease dispute.

The aircraft was about to depart for Pakistan when the local authorities asked that the crew and passengers disembark. From the details available, it appears that this particular jet is one of two leased by PIA from a Dublin-based company and is part of the portfolio sold by the latter to Peregrine Aviation Charlie Ltd, which is the plaintiff in the case.

As per the interim injunction, PIA is barred from moving the two 777s once they have landed or parked at Kuala Lumpur airport pending the next hearing later this month. The other jet affected by the order was recorded by a flight tracking service as being in Karachi last month.

The decline of an airline that started out with such promise, that was a pioneer in many respects and was instrumental in setting up some of today's most successful airlines, is an unmitigated tragedy. Decades of mismanagement, nepotism and political opportunism were bound to take their toll. Successive governments saw PIA as a means of rewarding the loyalty of supporters and the airline's cadres were packed with undeserving people.

With time, PIA became a byword for mediocrity and dysfunction — a frightening decline in an environment where the slightest mistake or oversight can cost lives, and indeed did so. For this, the Civil Aviation Authority as the regulator must shoulder a large part of the blame. Perennially deep in the red, PIA has needed to be bailed out by the government on a regular basis. Within the past year, it seems all the chickens have come home to roost.

The crash of PK-8303 close to the Karachi airport in May 2020 precipitated a series of disastrous developments. As the preliminary investigation report showed, the incident — in which 97 out of 99 people on board perished — was the outcome of several avoidable but deadly procedural errors. Then, almost immediately after, the aviation minister declared that the CAA-issued licences of 260 Pakistani pilots working in various local and overseas airlines were 'fake', a reckless statement that pre-empted the outcome of an ongoing inquiry. His words created a global furore.

PIA was banned from operating in several parts of the world by various international airline safety boards; and Pakistani pilots employed by foreign carriers were suspended until the provenance of their licences was investigated. In the end, the number of fraudulent licences turned out to be far lower, but the damage was done. PIA has yet to recover from that

catastrophe, and now this fresh embarrassment has surfaced. What is the airline management's game plan? Does it even have one?

## Agriculture woes

AGRICULTURE is the lifeline of Pakistan's economy. It is a source of livelihood for two-thirds of the country's population living in villages and employs almost 39pc of the national labour force besides contributing to the nation's overseas shipments of textiles, leather, rice, etc, which together form around three-quarters of the export revenue. More importantly, the country's food security is reliant on the performance of the agriculture sector. Yet, only a negligible amount of money is spent on research and development to develop new high-yield seed varieties, assist farmers adopt modern technologies, improve soil fertility, help cattle owners increase milk yield and meat production for domestic and export markets, and so on. On top of that, smallholders are left at the mercy of middlemen and speculators for credit to buy inputs at hefty costs. Much of the government input subsidies are directed towards major crops such as wheat, rice and sugarcane, a policy that discourages growers to shift from low- to high-value crops. Research shows that improvement in crop output is driven primarily by expansion of the cultivable area and the increased use of chemicals, which has spawned food-safety concerns. It is also hinders efforts to boost agricultural exports.

Thus, it is not without reason that Prime Minister Imran Khan has termed agriculture "the most important sector" for the country's future. We do not know what it means, but he has also directed the Punjab government to "remove all hurdles for facilitating farmers" and develop strategies for trebling agricultural production. No matter how important the prime minister's message is, it will sound hollow unless it is backed by radical changes in federal and provincial policies affecting the competitiveness of the farm sector. With food demand rising continuously on the back of high population growth, the government needs to allocate more resources to agriculture research, and set up initiatives to encourage adoption of innovative farm technologies. Inefficient subsidies, as shown by many studies, mostly end up in the pockets of middlemen or big farmers instead of helping smallholders. Besides, programmes are needed for increasing growers' access to cheaper, formal credit and linking them directly to the markets to eliminate the role of middleman to reduce their costs and raise their incomes. A well-developed agriculture sector can contribute majorly to national economic development and help alleviate rural poverty. For this to happen, policymakers need to clean up the mess they have made in this important sector.

## **Internet access**

AS the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, and shows few signs of dissipating, one of the many lessons policymakers should be noting is the importance of high-speed internet, particularly for educational purposes and remote work. Yet many parts of Pakistan continue to struggle with accessing the internet, or citizens are unable to afford its costs, or face connectivity issues, particularly in the peripheral regions of Gilgit-Baltistan, Balochistan and the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Furthermore, just as women face a constant stream of restrictions in the 'real world', their presence and access to the online world is filled with hurdles and setbacks.

Last week, the non-profit organisation Media Matters for Democracy published its most recent findings on women's access to the internet in a report titled Women Disconnected: Feminist Case Studies on the Gender Digital Divide Amidst Covid-19. Interviewing 215 women across Pakistan, including in the newly merged tribal districts, it noted that six out of 10 women faced some form of restriction from their families when accessing the internet, including for carrying out simple tasks such as attending online classes — the standard method of teaching for many during the pandemic — or communicating with family members on WhatsApp. Besides the gender divide, the survey also looked at socioeconomic barriers. It found that only 40pc of respondents use the internet daily; of those women, half belong to families earning more than Rs60,000 each month. Among women who do not use the internet at all, seven out of 10 belong to families who earn less than Rs30,000 each month. More than 75pc of respondents said that the internet was expensive and out of their reach. Additionally, when it came to cultural attitudes, many Pakistanis continue to regard women's access to the internet with suspicion, and more than half of the respondents mentioned concerns from family members. The survey offers a list of recommendations for the government, including the setting up of public Wi-Fi spaces that are accessible to women, keeping 'cultural dynamics' in mind.

## **LNG contracts**

THE LNG spot prices have spiked to a multi-year high in recent weeks over the fuel's rising demand in Asia as winter temperatures in Japan, China and Korea drop to below average levels. The surge in demand for the super-chilled fuel has also led to shortages of LNG cargo vessels, interrupting the supply chain and pushing freight rates to new highs.

The unprecedented price volatility in the global LNG market is leading many traders to bail on their earlier supply contracts, and forcing countries to start rationing gas owing to supply gaps. In Pakistan's case, the two LNG suppliers, who had won contracts to provide one cargo each in

February, have 'regretted' their inability to fulfil their commitment (owing to the massive gap between current spot rates and the price agreed under the deals), forfeiting their bid bonds.

"This bid default of the suppliers is associated with the recent supply shortages leading to high price volatility in the spot market coupled with extra buying in North Asia. There is news in the market about numerous global companies defaulting on their bids, or even contracts in some cases, given the supply shortages and extreme price volatility," the state-owned Pakistan LNG Ltd, which had ordered the import of gas, explained.

The rapid spot price variations in the global LNG market and consequent defaults by suppliers are a wake-up call for the PTI government, which has never been short of invectives to heap on its predecessor for striking a long-term deal with Qatar to procure the fuel. Why are long-term deals important for LNG-importing countries?

Such contracts ensure price stability in times when increasing demand or other factors drive up global markets. Besides, these guarantee security of supply. Hence, most LNG-importing countries prefer a blend of spot purchases and long-term deals to ensure supply at a lower average price in the winter. Indeed, the argument is valid that the previous government could have struck a better deal with Qatar. But the LNG prices catching up with the crude market underscores that the Qatari deal at 13 pc of Brent wasn't that bad either. Thus, the government must consider more long-term supply contracts as the demand for imported gas is expected to surge in the winters ahead.

That is not all, though. It is also time for the government to develop a long-term integrated energy policy to rid consumers of periodic shortages of electricity, gas and oil, and promote efficient use of different fuels. The reported government decision to stop the supply of gas to the most inefficient captive power plants run by the textile industry and others for electricity generation in view of the cargos' cancellation is a step in the right direction. In view of surplus generation, it is important for industry to reconnect with the national grid and for gas to be allocated for more efficient uses.

## **Murdered judges**

THE continuous violence in Afghanistan has raised serious questions about the sustainability of the peace process, as well as the Kabul government's ability to defend the country once all foreign forces leave. In the latest atrocity, two women judges working for Afghanistan's supreme court were killed in a Kabul ambush on Sunday, with suspicion falling on the Afghan Taliban. President Ashraf Ghani slammed the Taliban for launching an "illegitimate war and hostility" while the top American diplomat in the country has also singled out the Taliban for

the attack. The murders are the latest in a series of killings targeting prominent journalists, activists and members of Afghan civil society. It is believed that critical and independent voices are being eliminated one by one in Afghanistan to send a chilling message to others to keep quiet. This cycle of violence ties in with the bigger picture in Afghanistan, where attacks continue despite the fact that the government and Taliban are holding peace talks in Doha. However, if such horrific bloodshed continues, particularly targeting civilians, legitimate questions about the Taliban's commitment to the peace process will arise.

Perhaps to ensure that the Afghan Taliban denounce such brazen acts of violence, a commitment to not target officials, members of civil society and indeed all non-combatants in Afghanistan should be made part of any peace deal that emerges out of Doha. That way if such atrocities continue, the hard-line militia can at least be held to account. The fact is that if all Afghan stakeholders miss this window of opportunity to end the seemingly never-ending conflict in their homeland, it may be a long while before the next opportunity emerges. And while warlords, militants and others who live by the gun will not mind such a scenario, the forsaken people of Afghanistan will certainly be the ultimate losers. That is why a just and durable peace must be worked out in Doha between the government in Kabul and the Taliban. It is true that the Afghan government will be weakened if it is left to fend for itself after the foreign forces exit. But the Taliban must ask themselves what they seek to gain by prolonging the cycle of violence. If the militia is dreaming of retaking Kabul through force, it must remember that now there are other 'contenders', such as the local branch of IS, which thrive on bloodshed and play by very different rules.

## K2 feat

A TEAM of 10 Nepalese mountaineers made history over the weekend as they scaled the world's second highest peak K2 which had until now never been summited in winter. The climbers have set a benchmark of courage and endurance. Apart from the Nepalese feat, 367 climbers have completed the ascent of K2 in summer. Their numbers have included several Pakistani mountaineers including the prolific Nazeer Sabir, who scaled K2 in 1981, Hassan Sadpara, Fazal Ali and others. In 2014, six Pakistani climbers who were part of an expedition, scaled the K2 to become the first team of climbers from the country to do so. K2, which stands at a daunting 8,611m, is also known as the Savage Peak. It has a reputation for being the world's most difficult mountain to climb and is notorious for frequent rock falls and avalanches while the weather is unpredictable with strong winds and unusually low winter temperatures. Such perils have taken the lives of almost 90 climbers in their quest to scale the mountain. On the same day as the Nepalese summited the peak, a Spanish climber Sergi Mingote lost his life when he fell into a crevasse while returning to base camp. The current base camp at K2 was set

up in December 2020 which apparently featured the largest gathering of climbers in a winter season and some of the biggest names in mountaineering such as Waldemar Kowalewski and Pakistan's Ali Sadpara among others, according to the Alpine Club of Pakistan. Given its terrain in the north, it is a wonder that Pakistan has yet to develop its sports facilities and welcome visitors who are attracted to winter games.

As home to some of the highest peaks in the world, there is much potential for mountaineering, as there is for other sports such as skiing, snowboarding and even ice skating. While there have been recent attempts to encourage winter sports, not much can be accomplished without an effective sports policy.

## **Broadsheet judgement**

THE PTI government has taken a welcome step in making public the judgement of arbitration between Broadsheet and Pakistan/National Accountability Bureau that was handed down in 2016. Kaveh Moussavi, the head of Broadsheet, an asset recovery company, had been saying on public forums that he was giving permission to the government of Pakistan to make the document public and that the judgement would clarify confusion about the issue at hand.

On Monday, the prime minister's accountability adviser Shahzad Akbar said in a press conference that the government had received written permission from Mr Moussavi to make the judgement public and that Prime Minister Imran Khan had ordered that it be shared with the people of Pakistan without delay. The adviser said that the judgement clearly showed the cost that Pakistan had to pay for giving an NRO to those who had indulged in corrupt practices.

The judgement by Sir Anthony Evans spells out in great detail the follies committed since 2000 by NAB and its lawyers. It shows clearly how shoddy contracts and shady decision-making led to Pakistan cutting a sorry figure in court. This incompetence laced with political expediency has cost the Pakistani taxpayer \$28m in addition to a loss of face.

According to the judgement, the contract that NAB signed with Broadsheet in 2000 included a clause that allowed Broadsheet to claim a 20pc commission on all NAB recoveries outside Pakistan and also domestically, including such cases that Broadsheet may not have been involved in. At the hearing, a former NAB chairman has been quoted as saying that he thought the contract was only for Broadsheet work outside of Pakistan. Such was the level of incompetence.

This trend continued and later it transpired, as listed in the judgement, that Pakistan agreed to settle with Broadsheet but ended up giving \$1.5m to the wrong person. The judgement says the

fault was clearly that of NAB and its lawyers who should have known that the person they were making the payment to was not the legal recipient of the money.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has done well to constitute a committee to recommend a line of action on the findings of the judgement, including those pertaining to former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. Those who are responsible for decisions and actions that have cost Pakistan dearly must be identified, investigated and taken to task.

At the same time, this committee should also look into the disclosures made by Mr Moussavi after the judgement, including the allegation that some people during this government's stint had asked him for bribes. There are plenty of skeletons in the Broadsheet cupboard and they must be brought out into the open. The PTI government must ensure full transparency in the matter so that no facts are allowed to be obscured at the altar of political expediency.

## Unequal justice

IT seems no one wants to testify against former SSP Malir, Rao Anwar. At least five prosecution witnesses, all police officers, have retracted their statements in the Naqeebullah Mehsud murder case in which the retired police official is standing trial. Even the prosecution, which represents the state, scarcely seems interested in pursuing the case. Little wonder then, that the slain man's family, their lawyer and a PTI MNA on Sunday expressed their fear that a path is being cleared for Rao Anwar to be acquitted. The proceedings in the case are a chilling case study of the impunity enjoyed by some extremely powerful individuals in this country. So unaccountable are they that even the vicissitudes of politics do not affect them; the pomp and circumstance that accompanies them remains intact.

Naqeebullah, a 27-year-old aspiring model, was gunned down on Jan 13, 2018, along with three others in a fake encounter, allegedly on the orders of Rao Anwar, infamously known as an 'encounter specialist'. The record of the Karachi police itself implicates the senior official in no less than 444 deaths in such operations. No action had been taken against him for this gruesome run of murders until the death of Naqeebullah, who was described by Rao Anwar as a terrorist. Perhaps it was the young man's presence on social media and his obviously harmless preoccupations that struck a chord in civil society. A police inquiry also soon established that neither he nor the others killed with him even had criminal records, let alone terrorist profiles. Protests broke out demanding that Rao Anwar be brought to book. At this point, the state had a golden opportunity to turn the page on police brutality and extrajudicial killings, and demonstrate that no one, absolutely no one, is above the law. Instead, for five months the former SSP successfully evaded the law — with assistance from state elements — until he was



finally arrested. Even that was a mere inconvenience; his Karachi residence was declared a sub-jail, from the comfort of which he could appear for his court hearings. When he did so, it was without handcuffs, surrounded by police officers treating him with deference, and sporting the demeanour of a man who knew he had nothing to fear. It was a mockery of justice in every sense of the word, an affront to the most basic civic values. Impunity on this scale destroys nations from within.

## **Schools reopening**

THE disruptive impact of Covid-19 on education will be felt for years to come. For countries like Pakistan, where 44pc of the children were out of school even before the pandemic struck, the consequences will be devastating. In Pakistan, the extended closure of schools and colleges paints a bleak picture of the future. A recent World Bank report on education poverty had predicted that the pandemic could end up seeing at least 930,000 children out of primary and secondary schools in the country. This development, the report estimated, could cause losses of up to \$155bn to the national economy over the next 20 years. It is in light of this challenge that the federal government's decision to reopen educational institutions in phases must be viewed. At present, classes have resumed for classes nine through 12, while classes one through eight and university are set to resume from Feb 1. However, the federal education ministry has said it would reassess the situation after analysing the latest trajectory of Covid-19 cases in the country, and cities with high infection rates might be allowed to not reopen school for students of classes one through eight for some more time.

No doubt, while education has to be resumed, given Pakistan's problematic schooling landscape the enforcement of SOPs will be a Herculean task. During the lockdown, while many private schools opted for online classes, students of public schools, where having a desk to oneself is often a luxury let alone owning a laptop, were left to their own devices. Moreover, how will proper handwashing and social distancing be ensured in thousands of public schools that have no walls and potable water? These are only some of the problems that will need to be addressed immediately. The situation is unprecedented, and requires innovative and urgent solutions concerning compliance with SOPs. The education authorities must be prepared to think on their feet to ensure that schools, colleges and universities do not contribute to the infection rate in the country.

## **Rising food prices**

FOOD inflation continues to challenge the resolve of the government to control the prices of essential kitchen items as much as it does the patience of millions of lower-middle-income households across the country. In the last two years, food prices have increased by an aggregate of more than a third, forcing most families to cut down on their daily caloric intake. Others have been compelled to reduce their essential expenditure on education and health so that they can put food on the table. Barring its frequent claims of moving the administrative machinery against hoarders, the government has mostly stood on the side as a helpless bystander. A report in this newspaper on Wednesday lays bare the government's claims of having brought food inflation down. The prices of sugar and staple wheat flour have risen again significantly in spite of the availability of sufficient stocks of the two commodities. Similarly, pulses, edible oil and other items are also showing a rising price trend. Traders blame speculators — or middlemen — and increasing global commodity prices for the return of this drift. Even the threat of more sugar imports and wheat seems to have failed to deter the speculators from manipulating the market. Though the government formed a committee earlier this month to take action against hoarders, nothing substantive has been done so far to provide relief to the citizens.

These have been very difficult times for the majority of the population because of the devastating impact of Covid-19 on an economy that was already struggling. A large number of people employed in the informal sectors have lost their jobs as businesses struggle to cope with the effects of the health crisis. Others have had to bear heavy cuts in their wages. The rising food prices in these circumstances have underscored the government's inability to do its job properly and protect citizens from profiteers and market manipulators. It is time the government stopped making hollow claims and started doing its job.

## **Agosta kickbacks trial**

A POLITICALLY significant trial opened in Paris yesterday. Former French prime minister Edouard Balladur is in the dock on charges that he used 'retro commissions' from arms deals to fund his presidential bid in 1995. Along with his then defence minister, Mr Balladur was charged in 2017 with "complicity in the misuse of corporate assets" over the sale of frigates to Saudi Arabia and the Agosta submarines to Pakistan.

The suicide bombing on May 8, 2002, outside the Sheraton hotel in Karachi that killed 13 French naval engineers visiting Pakistan to assist in building the submarines was a seminal

moment in the saga. It turned what was until then a tale of financial wrongdoing into one about a possible act of revenge. Initially, coming as it did less than a year after 9/11 and only a few months following Daniel Pearl's horrific murder in Karachi, the attack seemed most likely to have been perpetrated by religious extremists.

Soon however, French investigators began to focus on the possibility that the attack was engineered by elements in Pakistan as reprisal after President Jacques Chirac suspended the commission payments when the practice was criminalised in 2000. (Although in the 1990s the giving of such 'gifts' was legal in France, 'retro commissions' — in which the money was re-routed back to France through money laundering — were always illegal.) What became known as 'l'affaire Karachi' implicated not only prominent French politicians but also some individuals in the Pakistani military and political elite.

The deal for the sale of three Agosta military submarines to Pakistan was worth around \$1bn; of this, some \$50m were set aside for kickbacks, of which \$2m were found to be 'retro commissions'. The point to note here is that although the investigators' efforts were thwarted time and again by interested parties using their clout, they continued to painstakingly build their case over nearly a quarter of a century. In June last year, six people were convicted by a Paris court and sentenced to prison for their role in the scandal. Now it is the turn of the former premier and the ex-defence minister to face the music.

In Pakistan however, aside from former naval chief Mansurul Haq, who was forced into early retirement and later had to return some of his ill-gotten gains in a plea bargain with NAB, virtually no one has been held to account. Some other naval officials were also apprehended, but a likely cover-up by Gen Musharraf's military government prevented all those culpable from being proceeded against. And they will probably go scot free — unless there is some advantage to be achieved in prosecuting them. Sadly, that is how accountability is in Pakistan, a handmaiden of political opportunism, something that can be twisted into whatever those in power want it to be.

## **Indian media scandal**

IT is best if the fourth estate and the government maintain a healthy distance, because when members of the media get too close to the corridors of power, independent journalism suffers and the narrative of those in government can trump the truth.

The recent scandal involving ultra-hawkish Indian anchor Arnab Goswami is a case in point. Mr Goswami, not exactly known for subtlety, fairness and accuracy in reporting, has been accused of having advance knowledge of the Indian strike on Balakot in February 2019. The scandal

erupted after purported WhatsApp messages between the anchor and the head of an under-investigation ratings company were made public.

In the messages, Mr Goswami appears to be telling the other party that “something major” would happen vis-à-vis Pakistan, going on to mention a “bigger than normal strike”. Of course, the strike did occur, and India was given a befitting reply for its adventurism by this country. However, the leak illustrates the dangerous nexus that exists between right-wing Indian media outlets and the Hindu chauvinist BJP that rules from New Delhi.

While ‘embedded’ journalism is not new and some media outlets in this country are also seen to be close to those who call the shots, the recent scandal in India reveals a far more dangerous reality. In the Goswami case, sensitive information was shared with a news outlet seemingly to help the BJP’s election prospects and boost the rightist media outlet’s ratings in the process. This is a dangerous game which, if not nipped in the bud, can have many negative consequences. The first casualty in such situations is of course the truth, while media outlets such as the one in the midst of the scandal end up radicalising the public through their non-stop jingoistic broadcasts.

Common sense, factual reporting and ethics are all chucked out the window in the maddening race for ratings, influence and power. Instead of promoting peace, such an unholy nexus between powerful media outlets and the state only serves to amplify the shrill cries for war in a volatile region. Saner media outlets and moderate political elements in India need to address this unhealthy trend before brinkmanship, fuelled by a pliant, cheerleading media, leads to a potential disaster in South Asia. Last time war was averted thanks largely due to Pakistan’s firm, mature response. However, such shenanigans should not be tried again simply for a few ratings points and votes on election day

## **Time to heal**

Wednesday, a sense of normality returned to Washington as Joe Biden took his oath of office as US president, bringing to an end four tumultuous years of Trumpism. Donald Trump’s time in the White House was a veritable roller-coaster ride, with the former president throwing convention to the wind and creating a number of crises domestically and in foreign affairs. Therefore, Mr Biden has a major task ahead of him, and it will require the veteran American politician to go the extra mile to put out the many fires his unorthodox predecessor has lit.

It is a fact that Joe Biden is no revolutionary statesman; in fact, he represents the status quo ante, a return to predictable American politics. However, after Mr Trump, one can say that a return to ‘normal’ may not be such a bad thing. On the home front, Mr Biden has to deal with a

raging coronavirus pandemic, a floundering economy and a nation deeply divided along racial and ideological lines.

Overseas, he will have to steer American policy in a positive direction after Donald Trump provoked China as well as Iran. He will also have to coax America out of isolation mode and steer it towards reintegration into the global mainstream.

Within the US, the Trump era exposed racial tensions that had been bubbling under the surface for long and that exploded last summer during the Black Lives Matter protests, following the murder of George Floyd. Meanwhile, the attack on the US Capitol earlier this month by Trump supporters showed that the far right in the US is hardly a spent force, and has literally shaken the corridors of power. Therefore, ensuring racial justice and checking the mushroom growth of far-right white extremism must top Mr Biden's domestic agenda.

The Covid-19 pandemic also looms large over the US; the new president has already signed a raft of measures to deal with the crisis. Moreover, Mr Biden has reversed the so-called Muslim ban, while saying that the US was back in the Paris climate accord. On the foreign front, a number of issues await the new US leader's attention. These include the confrontation with China, whom Mr Trump accused of "ripping off" the US, setting in motion a steady decline in Sino-American relations. Mr Biden's predecessor also ripped up the Iran nuclear accord and at one point brought Washington and Tehran dangerously close to war.

Further, Mr Trump's mollycoddling of Israel destroyed any illusion of American neutrality in the Arab-Israeli dispute. All these foreign issues will test Mr Biden's mettle and require progressive thinking. Where Pakistan is concerned, key members of the new president's team have said this country is an 'essential partner' especially where peace in Afghanistan is concerned. It is hoped the Biden administration works to improve the bilateral relationship with Pakistan in order to help bring peace and prosperity to South Asia.

## **Foreign funding**

AS the pressure builds on his party in the foreign funding case, Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for an expanded public scrutiny of funds given to all political parties. Mr Khan made this statement in response to criticism by the opposition parties who have called on the ECP to conclude the case of the foreign funds allegedly received by the PTI. The matter has dragged on for over six years. While the PPP and PML-N have indicated they would accept Mr Khan's challenge, the ECP has ruled out the option of a public hearing and has asked that "unnecessary comments" be avoided in this case.

In principle, the full disclosure of political finances received by parties and candidates during polls is a critical step towards increasing electoral transparency and accountability. In some countries, there are laws that require political parties to disclose the source and amount of funds received, while in others there is a cap on how much can be spent by a candidate. Such practices if followed would indeed strengthen the democratic process in Pakistan, where allegations of bribes and horse-trading mar every election. However, Mr Khan's demand that the scrutiny be applied to other parties too is a tad hollow. His party's source of foreign funds have been the subject of an investigation for over six years now — a period that has seen considerable foot-dragging by the PTI in the form of petitions challenging the ECP's jurisdiction. In this context, where his party has fought tooth and nail against disclosure, his demand for across-the-board accountability reeks of double standards. Ironically, his view here is similar to the demands of the opposition parties, who have railed against a targeted witch-hunt at the hands of the PTI and NAB. The PPP and PML-N have repeatedly pointed out that the rules of accountability are different for the ruling party and the opposition. In contrast, Mr Khan has not only claimed the anti-corruption drive is independent, he has also consistently hit out at his rivals in the opposition for evading accountability and disrespecting the judicial process. For him to call for an expanded inquiry at a time when his party is in the dock will be seen as an attempt to deflect attention from the case. Perhaps it is time he held himself to rigorous standards of accountability, and came out with the facts regarding the PTI's finances so that the foreign funding case can be put to rest.

## **Decaying PTV**

THE Cabinet Committee on State-Owned Enterprises has decided to remove Pakistan Television from the list of organisations proposed to be privatised. This decision was based on a request from the Ministry of Information whose representative argued that PTV was in the process of being restructured and revamped so it can become financially viable and efficient in order to amplify the national narrative. The decision not to privatise the organisation may be a good one but the problem with PTV is much larger. The fundamental issue is the government's inability to comprehend the actual role of a taxpayer-funded channel. In Pakistan, we continue to call PTV the 'state broadcaster' whose primary role is to serve the government of the day. This is wrong. In a democracy, a channel funded by the taxpayer is envisioned as a 'public broadcaster' whose mandate is to generate wholesome and credible content aimed at informing, educating and entertaining viewers in a way that they become better and more empowered citizens of the state. A public broadcaster is not supposed to be a mouthpiece for the government of the day spewing crude propaganda, substandard news and information devoid of credibility and authenticity. Sadly, this is what PTV is doing today.

There is only one way to reform this white elephant. It must be taken away from the clutches of the information ministry and the governing board beholden to the government, and handed over to an independent and professional management that can run it without any official pressure. There are various examples in the world where countries have converted their decaying state media organisations into vibrant public broadcasters, so if the PTI government has the vision, courage and foresight to make the decision, implementing it will not be a very difficult task. PTV in its present form is a burden that the Pakistani taxpayer must not have to carry. If it is not reformed it will go the way of the dinosaurs.

## New PhD policy

EARLIER in the week, the HEC chairman announced several changes for undergraduate and PhD degrees in the country. Under the new policies, the two-year BA/BSc and MA/MSc programmes would stop being optional and be phased out, while a four-year BS programme would be offered in their stead. The more significant policy change, however, affects the admission criteria of the PhD programmes offered in the country. The minimum requirement for years of study for admission to a PhD programme has been reduced from 18 to 16. Through this, the requirement for obtaining an MPhil degree to pursue a doctorate degree has also been waived; students can now apply for a PhD programme directly after completing a four-year BS degree. However, students who obtain admission to a PhD programme after completing their BS degree will have to put in more credit hours of work as compared to those holding an MPhil degree.

Not everyone has welcomed these changes which have drawn criticism from teachers' and lecturers' associations. The Federation of All Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Association has voiced its concerns, pointing out that the new policies would reduce the quality of research, which an MPhil degree focuses on, and also imperil students' prospects of admission to PhD programmes in foreign universities where a Bachelor's degree from Pakistani educational institutes is often not accepted. What has also been underscored is the failure of the government to take the viewpoint of academic circles into consideration. It is an open secret that the existing higher education and research culture in the country is nowhere near where it should be. According to the HEC chairman, the new changes have been introduced to address the disparity between the country's higher education system and industry where an average graduate has few marketable skills. However, for any new policy to work, a much larger debate is needed on the issue, along with efforts to address the many deep-rooted structural problems of higher education in the country.



# Power price hike

ALREADY struggling to cope with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and rising food prices, consumers received yet another rude shock when the government increased the unified base power tariff of distribution companies by a whopping 15pc. Even though the government had been dropping hints about hiking the tariff ever since it resumed talks with the IMF for the revival of the suspended \$6bn loan deal, low-middle-income consumers have reeled from the announcement. Another electricity tariff increase is expected in April. The across-the-board electricity price hike of Rs1.95 per unit, which is estimated to put an additional burden of Rs200bn on consumers, will likely help the government pay the growing compulsory capacity payments — the fixed costs of the power producers — and is expected to slow down the circular debt.

However, rather than owning the decision, the ruling PTI has put the entire blame for the tariff increase on the previous PML-N administration. Indeed, the latter is largely responsible for ordering excessive and expensive new generation on the basis of an exaggerated forecast regarding electricity consumption and without cleaning up the mess in the power sector. But that doesn't absolve the PTI administration of its own failure to fix the power sector in the last two and a half years. Its predecessor may have left 'landmines' for it as PTI ministers claim. But what stopped it from clearing those landmines instead of blowing them up in the face of the people? The government owes an explanation to consumers who have been asked to foot the bill for its own poor performance.

The decision to increase electricity rates is yet another reminder that the crumbling power sector needs urgent reforms — not the kind of reforms focused on passing on the costs of the power sector's inefficiencies to consumers, but those that will aim at reducing T&D losses, increasing recovery of bills, and curbing power theft through improved governance. Sadly, the few gains made under the previous government in slashing system losses and improving bill recovery have been reversed in the last two years. The losses have increased by about 1.5pc and bill recovery has reduced by 5pc. Little wonder then that the circular debt has ballooned to Rs2.3tr (and is anticipated to grow to Rs2.8tr by the end of this fiscal) from Rs1.1tr when the PTI took over. The government says it is implementing a raft of measures to control compulsory capacity payments to power producers. These include negotiation with the sponsors of upcoming generation projects of 10,000 MW for staggering their timelines to provide "breathing space for consumption and payments", changes in the terms of existing power-purchase agreements with producers, and so on. These are steps in the right direction. But they aren't enough and need to be supported by improvements in power-sector governance to reduce the pressure of electricity tariffs.

# Israeli land grab

WITH the chapter now closed on the Trump presidency, the eyes of many in the international community — particularly the Palestinians and all those who wish to see a just settlement for them — will be on Washington to see if Joe Biden can bring a semblance of neutrality to the Arab-Israeli dispute.

The Trump era was of course one where Israel was given royal treatment by America, while the Palestinians were treated with disdain. The so-called deal of the century, a failed Trumpian solution to the dispute, was roundly rejected by the Palestinians as it sought to reward Israel for its decades of land grabbing and violence, and limit the Arabs to ‘reservations’ on their ancestral land. However, with Mr Biden in the driving seat, there may be a change in tone, if not substance, from Washington.

Israel, in the meantime, seems committed to illegally devouring more and more Arab land and creating ‘facts on the ground’. As reported by Israeli NGO Peace Now, Tel Aviv has issued tenders for 2,500 settler homes in the occupied territories, a move that is considered illegal under international law. The development is apparently aimed at the Israeli election, due in March, as Benjamin Netanyahu seeks to cling to power and fend off challenges to the premiership from right-wing challengers by appeasing hard-line voters.

While on the record Mr Biden has condemned Israeli settlements, members of his administration have said there is no plan to reverse Donald Trump’s move to recognise the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. It would be naive to hope for a complete turnaround in US policy in favour of the Palestinians as Mr Biden as well as his vice president are committed Israel supporters, as are most members of the American political establishment. However, it is hoped that the new US leader will at least temper some of the more overtly pro-Israel policies of his predecessor. Specifically, the expansion of illegal settlements must end, while Israel’s brutal treatment of Palestinians, particularly its frequent savage forays into Gaza, cannot continue.

The two-state solution is indeed on life support, thanks largely to Israeli impunity and America’s indulgence of its favourite Middle Eastern client. Yet if the peace process is to be revived, then the Palestinians must get a fair deal which promises them a viable state safe from the predatory attacks of Israel. If this formula is ignored, more turbulence is in store for the region.

# **Bureaucracy reform**

WHILE the intention behind the endeavour may be lauded, the civil service reform package unveiled by the government the other day has come as a disappointment to many who believed the bureaucracy would be restructured in such a way as to make it more responsive to the ever-changing requirements of the economy and the needs of the citizens. Instead of reducing the discretionary powers of the bureaucrats and making them accountable to the people, the new reforms only appear to address procedural improvements in the rules of business. It does not mean that the proposed changes, which include new criteria for promotion to higher grades, a mechanism for forced retirement of under-performers, induction of provincial service officers into the Pakistan Administrative Services, new rotation policy, etc are not needed. But these are relatively minor issues that could have easily been addressed as part of an umbrella civil service restructuring plan aimed at boosting overall governance by building the capacity of the bureaucracy to deal with the demands of a changing world, as well as improving public service delivery. The ruling party has come to power on the promise of change — it is only comprehensive, wide-ranging reforms that can ensure this. Indeed, the committee, which had been assigned the job almost two years back, could have done much better, given the expectations.

Several studies in the past have pointed to the fact that a dysfunctional and inefficient bureaucracy is seriously undermining the nation's social and economic progress, and increasing public distrust of the state's intentions and ability to serve its citizens. Yet only limited progress has been made in the last seven decades to reform the administrative structure inherited from the British colonialists in spite of several attempts by successive governments to do so. Past efforts to remodel the country's civil service did not make the desired impact because of a lack of knowledge about what needed to be done and politicisation of the bureaucracy. Besides the bureaucracy is seen as resistant to any change that would hurt its powers and perks. The lack of political will to push through civil service reforms is another key reason for the failure of every attempt to introduce meaningful changes. It would not be incorrect to say that like past governments the present administration will also continue to face roadblocks in executing its socioeconomic agenda unless it moves beyond cosmetic bureaucratic reforms.

## **Delayed olive branch**

THE PTI government has finally mustered up sufficient political prudence to extend an olive branch to the opposition in an attempt to build a better working relationship in parliament. But many say it is a case of too little, too late.

According to a report in this newspaper, a three-member delegation from the treasury benches visited the parliamentary chamber of the Leader of the Opposition Shehbaz Sharif and asked for the opposition's help in running the business of parliament more smoothly. The delegation, which included Defence Minister Pervez Khattak, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ali Muhammad Khan and Chief Whip Amir Dogar, argued that the two sides should collaborate to bring down the temperature in the House and work together on people-friendly legislation.

The opposition, however, reminded them that it is the government that has been calling the opposition thieves, dacoits and traitors. The opposition members said the government was only reaching out because the opposition was taking them to task on the Broadsheet scandal.

It is no secret that ever since the PTI came to power, parliament has been reduced to a wrestling ring where shouting matches have taken the place of serious legislative work. The government shares the bulk of the blame for this sorry state of affairs. Prime Minister Imran Khan, who had once promised that he would hold a question hour regularly in parliament, has now almost totally absented himself from the proceedings. The treasury benches too have made it their priority to bring their street politics into parliament. As a result, legislative work has almost ground to a halt and parliament's role as the centre point of a democratic system has diminished considerably. Perhaps the government did not realise that making parliament dysfunctional to browbeat the opposition would ultimately have an adverse impact on its own performance.

More than halfway through their term, the treasury benches are now recognising that they have the most to lose if they have little to show for their legislative performance. However it may be a bit too much to expect that the opposition would suddenly turn the other cheek while it is being constantly hounded. The price of confrontational politics is a steep one, as the government may be belatedly realising.

It is though never too late. The government should go the extra mile to improve the environment in the House and establish a basic minimum working relationship with the opposition. A good first step would be for the government to get off its high horse and engage the opposition in some meaningful dialogue that goes beyond optics. Two issues demand urgent attention: electoral reforms and amendments to the NAB ordinance. If the government

can bring itself to stop targeting and heaping scorn on the opposition, perhaps some steady progress can be made on the floor of the House.

## **Minority rights**

ON Thursday, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to safeguard religious sites around the world, in line with the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The resolution was proposed by Saudi Arabia, co-sponsored by Pakistan and other nations from the developing world, and supported by the US and EU. However, it did not take long before delegates from India and Pakistan began arguing over the status of minority rights in each other's territory. Unfortunately, a number of countries are found wanting when it comes to protecting and preserving the right to life and dignity of minority citizens — and this discrimination is often endorsed by the state and preserved by society, through the passage of discriminatory laws, prejudice and wilful ignorance. This includes many of the governments that sponsored the resolution. For instance, at the UNGA, the Indian delegate brought up the attack by a mob on a Hindu shrine in Karak, KP, to highlight the insecurity felt by minorities in Pakistan. Yet around that same time, towards the tail end of the previous year, communal violence broke out in parts of BJP-governed Madhya Pradesh. Indeed, radicalised elements on the other side of the border are more than just fringe elements and follow the lead of the Hindutva government.

Where Pakistan is concerned, the government has made some progress in recent years when it comes to preserving minority places of worship. In April 2019, the government announced the reopening of the 1,000-year-old Shawala Teja Singh temple in Sialkot, sealed for 72 years, and attacked by a mob in 1992. Then, in November 2019, Pakistan inaugurated the Kartarpur Corridor, with approximately 12,000 pilgrims present, which allowed Sikhs from India and the diaspora to visit Gurdwara Darbar Sahib — one of the holiest sites in Sikhism. However, in July 2020, construction of the Shri Krishna Mandir in Islamabad had been halted following threats and the tearing down of the boundary wall. In its efforts to protect minority rights, Pakistan must also focus on changing mindsets.

## PPP's plan?

THE PDM faces a fresh crisis as the PPP takes a conspicuously soft position on the long march. While the PDM talks of mass resignations and a 'decisive' march, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari last week said his party hopes to remove Prime Minister Imran Khan's government through a no-confidence move in the National Assembly. Mr Bhutto-Zardari also vowed to persuade members of the opposition alliance to adopt this view, which he said is a "democratic, constitutional and lawful procedure". It is unclear how the PPP chairman will achieve this goal, as not only does the opposition not have the numbers in the National Assembly to pull off such a stunt, but street agitation is still very much part of the PDM's plans. When the PDM was formed, the opposition parties at the multiparty conference pledged to topple the government with a three-pronged strategy — the ultimate component was a long march. The PPP, too, has publicly endorsed this position. While toppling a government through democratic means such as no-confidence motions or street agitation is within the rights of the opposition parties, the PPP's volte-face on this key step in the alliance's strategy puts a question mark on the self-proclaimed democratic character of the movement.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari must explain what has brought about this change of tack. Is there pressure on his party to amend its position? After the early days of hitting out at the government and targeting 'selectors', the PPP first buckled with a lukewarm response to the resignation issue and is now abandoning the long march idea. Even if the PPP manages to persuade the PML-N on this issue — the chances of which are slim — together the two opposition parties do not have the numbers in the Assembly to successfully pass such a motion without external engineering. An unsuccessful motion would further strengthen the government's position and undermine if not decimate the PDM. Ironically, in 2018 when the PPP with its strength in the Senate brought about a no-trust motion against then chairman Sadiq Sanjrani, it fell flat on its face. How then, with a strength of 50-odd MNAs does it plan to pass a motion that requires 170 or so votes? The PPP has some explaining to do, and must make clear what its motivations are one way or the other. For it to adopt a strategy of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds is politically damaging.

## Forward guidance

THE State Bank has taken the unusual step of issuing a forward guidance in its latest monetary policy statement to tell markets that no raise in interest rates is likely in the near term, but it remains to be seen whether this will mollify sceptical buyers of government debt. The most likely explanation for why the regulator felt it necessary to take this step is the lacklustre

participation that recent debt auctions have seen. Most bids are now congregating around shorter three-month tenors in Treasury bills, which is usually an indication that banks are expecting a rate hike. In the last auction conducted on Jan 13, 96pc of the realised value was in three-month paper. With its forward guidance, the State Bank seems to be telling the banks that their anticipation of a rate hike is futile and they should modify their bidding behaviour.

The next debt auction is scheduled for Jan 27 and it will provide an interesting opportunity to test the impact of the forward guidance. If the banks refuse to heed the State Bank's words and continue crowding around the shortest tenor on offer, it will be a sign of the futility of the exercise. At that point, the central bank will have some decisions to make. Most market analysts were not expecting a rate hike at this point in any case, but the unusual meeting between the State Bank governor and the prime minister only days before the monetary policy decision has given rise to the impression that the central bank might have been prodded to not raise rates at this time. A rate hike would have adverse consequences for the nascent recovery underway in the economy, and that is something the government is understandably reluctant to see happen. But if markets are not assuaged, and pressure from the IMF is strong, the central bank might have limited options because continuing with low rates could have implications for the exchange rate, as well as the profile of the stock of government debt.

## Where the buck stops

THERE'S no getting around it: the buck stops with the prime minister. The Islamabad High Court said as much on Tuesday when it observed that the country's chief executive and his cabinet were responsible for enforced disappearances in the federal capital.

In keeping with that stance, it sought a list of the prime ministers and cabinet members who had been in office since the time that a computer engineer named Imran Khan was allegedly abducted from his Islamabad residence in 2015. The IHC is currently hearing a petition filed by the missing man's mother which says there was no case or complaint filed against him in any police station, and that if he was suspected of any crime he should have been proceeded against in court.

That is precisely what the Constitution holds: the rights to due process and security of person are accorded to every individual in this country. When such fundamental rights are trampled upon, a country becomes unmoored from the values that qualify it to be considered a 'civilised' nation, and a slide into unalloyed authoritarianism becomes almost inevitable.

The courts in Pakistan are taking an increasingly firm stance against enforced disappearances. Their message is clear: the government and its functionaries cannot simply throw up their



hands and claim the matter is beyond their power to resolve. As the IHC's top judge, Justice Athar Minallah, noted in the case mentioned above, the security, well-being and safety of a citizen is the state's constitutional obligation. On Jan 1, the IHC took the unprecedented step of imposing a Rs10m fine on several government personnel for their failure in locating another individual, Ghulam Qadir, who has been missing since six years.

Then, a few days ago while hearing the petition filed for the recovery of Abdullah Omar, abducted in 2015, the IHC's Justice Kayani pointed out: "The state should not 'serve' the nation through illegal means." He also said that if the case was not resolved to the court's satisfaction, it would take action against the incumbent IG and interior secretary. Earlier last week, a Sindh High Court bench, irked by the state's inability to trace a person missing for over six years warned of sending the secretaries for defence and the interior to prison for their failure. The bench rejected the report submitted by the investigating officer in the case, saying "This drama will not be tolerated any longer".

These are but three cases of missing people in what has become a never-ending saga. While the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances pursues its mandate in a half-baked manner, it is left to the courts to pick up the mantle for the Pakistanis spirited away for unknown 'transgressions' from the quiet backwaters of Balochistan to the crowded streets of the country's capital. When will the government step up to the task?

## **Pakistan-US ties**

IN the field of bilateral relations, Pakistan's relationship with the US is indeed amongst its most complex, and most important. Complex because despite being allies the two states often do not see eye to eye on a number of subjects. And important because despite all its internal crises, the US remains the world's most powerful country, one Pakistan cannot afford to ignore.

Whenever a new administration enters the White House, there is much speculation about the shape the relationship will take over the next four years. Over the last decade or so, both the Obama and Trump eras were lukewarm at best, with little positivity and plenty of tense moments between both capitals. Now, with Joe Biden occupying the Oval Office, the guessing game has begun again over how bilateral ties will develop.

To ensure that the relationship with the Biden White House is a mutually beneficial one, Islamabad will have to be proactive in projecting Pakistan's interests and clearly communicating this country's point of view to those that matter in Washington. Afghanistan is an area of common interest as both Islamabad and Washington desire peace in that country. The foreign

minister stated as much in Multan on Sunday. However, members of Mr Biden's team have said they are going to "review" the Trump-era peace pact signed with the Afghan Taliban.

There is of course a need to handle this file with care, and build on the progress achieved so far, rather than taking any steps which may imperil the peace process. Moreover, while there has been mild criticism of India from Team Biden vis-à-vis New Delhi's actions in India-held Kashmir, Pakistan must remain vigilant and realistic, as the new American administration is unlikely to take India to task for its brutal treatment of Kashmiris. Also, it should be remembered that Donald Trump had offered to help resolve the Kashmir issue; this offer did not succeed primarily due to Indian stubbornness over the issue.

In other areas, the Democrats are seen to be prioritising human rights issues in foreign policy. That is why Pakistan must ensure that no situations emerge domestically that can be used against this country. Overall, efforts are required to make the relationship less transactional, with Washington broadening its perspective where Pakistan is concerned and looking beyond the so-called Afghan lens. This country should push for more trade as opposed to aid and try and invite American investment. To think that a fruitful relationship will be built over weeks or months is naive.

Genuine efforts are required from both sides to further develop positions on points where both sides have a common viewpoint, and handle differences carefully through diplomatic channels. A peaceful, prosperous South Asia is in the interest of all and is the reason why the US should keep Pakistan's concerns in mind while developing regional policies.

## **NAB not impartial**

NAB CHAIRMAN retired justice Javed Iqbal has claimed that his organisation is an unbiased anti white-collar-crime agency and maintains a balance between cases involving the government and the opposition. He mentioned the money-laundering cases involving members of the opposition and the sugar and wheat crises linked to the government as proof of his organisation's even-handedness. The chairman may have been prompted to issue such a statement in an effort to dispel the impression that NAB has become a tool for the government to persecute the opposition. This perception, unfortunately, reflects the unmistakable reality prevailing in the country. The key problem manifests itself in the genesis of NAB. The organisation was birthed by the former military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf to go after the opposition with the primary aim of discrediting them in front of the population. If ever NAB had any pretensions about being a genuine anti white-collar-crime agency, they were put to rest when it stopped pursuing those politicians who were needed to support the Musharraf

government. With its foundation weakened by expediency and flawed by compromise, NAB was fated to fall short of its mandate. Through the years therefore, NAB could never shed this image of being a convenient handmaiden for the government of the day.

The Broadsheet scandal has erased any doubts, if ever they existed, that NAB suffers not just from a compromised DNA, but also an incompetent one. The shoddy drafting of the Broadsheet contract, the shady hiring of a dubious company and the inept handling of the legal contest with this company, all reflect very poorly on NAB. In the last few years, the organisation's imbalance has become even more acute. The way that NAB has gone after opposition leaders while ignoring the shady doings inside the government has contributed tremendously towards further tarnishing the image and credibility of the organisation. At the same time, its performance record also stays true to its DNA, with weak investigation and prosecution becoming its hallmark. Even the Supreme Court of Pakistan has admonished NAB for its unenviable track record. So the NAB chairman is on a weak wicket when he claims that his organisation is impartial. No, it is not. NAB is a deeply flawed entity functioning on the basis of an equally flawed law. The only way to reform it is to review its entire legal and political mandate and cleanse not just its body, but its soul.

## **Pakistan-South Africa series**

IN what is seen as a rare instance, Pakistan start as the underdogs on their home turf when they take on South Africa in the first of the two Tests at the National Stadium today. The hosts, despite their record of just two defeats in 40 Test matches at the historic cricket ground, will be aiming to salvage their dented pride after the calamitous New Zealand tour last month that resulted in Test and T20 defeats for Pakistan. The series, the first by a major cricketing nation in Pakistan in over a decade since the ghastly terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in 2009, will pose a number of challenges for Babar Azam and his men as well as the high-profile support staff led by Misbah-ul-Haq. Both Babar, making his debut as Test skipper in Karachi, and under-fire head coach Misbah will be mindful of the fact that there is no room for mistakes now, especially after the New Zealand tour. There have been deafening cries for an overhaul while the media has been unsparing in its criticism. Thankfully, new chief selector Mohammad Wasim's bold move in ousting the blundering seniors and inducting nine uncapped players might have spared Pakistan cricket further embarrassment.

Having said that, the South African team will be at full strength and are riding high having scored a comprehensive series win at home against Sri Lanka last month. The tourists, led by the multi-talented Quinton de Kock, boast fine players such as Aiden Markram, Faf du Plessis, Dean Elgar, Kagiso Rabada, Dwaine Pretorius and Lungi Ngidi who are certain to pose a stiff

challenge. Pakistan must go in with a positive mindset. They need to play aggressive cricket in order to lift the morale of the players and make the most of home conditions. It is time to take some hard decisions about all aspects of their game — captaincy, batting, bowling and fielding. That is the only way they can turn things around in Pakistan cricket.

## **Increasing debt**

THE numbers released by the State Bank regarding the government's domestic debt stock and servicing at the end of November present us with a mixed picture. That the debt has increased almost 12pc to Rs35.8tr and debt repayments 38pc to Rs921bn from a year ago underscores the expanding gap between the government's income and expenditure. Not only that, it also underlines the fact that the government is forced to borrow more money every year from domestic and foreign sources to pay its bills, including repayments on old loans, because it has utterly failed in its attempts to execute tax reforms in order to mobilise enough revenues. The hefty growth in public debt means that government expenditure on debt repayments will continue to rise quite substantially with the passage of time. The central bank, for example, reported in its recent monetary policy report compendium that the steep rise in interest payments consumed over 73pc of the total tax collection of the FBR and constituted close to 53.8pc of the total federal expenditure in the first quarter of the present financial year to September. It also means that the fiscal space available for undertaking socioeconomic development in the country is shrinking fast.

The positive side of the picture is that the composition of domestic loans is changing in favour of long-term, permanent debt from short-term, floating debt. This change is indicative of the improvement in the government's debt management strategy. At the same time, we see a significant drop in unfunded debt or public investments and savings in the national saving schemes owing mainly to decreased interest rates. But the changes in the composition of the borrowings will only help us delay the loan repayments for a while without slowing down the pace of growth in the size of the debt stock. The only sustainable way of controlling debt and creating room for greater development spending lies in mobilising taxes in keeping with the economy's true potential.

## **Pemra's powers**

IN an increasingly restrictive environment for the media, the last thing Pemra needs is more powers to tighten the screws on the press. And yet, that is what the PTI government is attempting to do in the guise of concern for the welfare of mediapersons. On Monday, the

opposition-dominated upper house rejected a bill moved by PTI Senator Faisal Javed proposing that Pemra be given the power to inquire into complaints against private channels of violating contractual obligations.

PPP Senator Sherry Rehman correctly described it as an attempt to gain further control over electronic media by using the “backdoor”. She suggested discussions be held with representative bodies including the Pakistan Broadcasters Association and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists before enacting such legislation.

It is an undeniable fact that some media houses are violating their contractual obligations towards their employees, especially those lower down the pay scale. For example, payment of salaries can be delayed, sometimes by several months. However, it is scarcely a regulator’s job to delve into human resource management; its role should be limited to the content on electronic media. It is also ironic that the bill assumes the posture of looking out for media employees. The right to freedom of expression has been curtailed on the PTI government’s watch to such an extent that it invites comparisons with martial law times.

Intrepid journalism that speaks truth to power is an invitation to trouble in the form of threats, suspension of ads, etc. Some journalists have even been subjected to short-term abductions. To date, the government has released only a small portion of the advertising dues it owes to media outlets. This, coupled with the overall economic downturn, has resulted in hundreds of journalists losing their jobs as media houses try to cope with shrinking revenues.

## Women in conflict

“WHEN the guns fall silent, it does not mean the suffering of women and girls stops. The suffering and abuse that women and girls are exposed to is long-term,” said UNFPA Regional Director for Arab States Luay Shabaneh, as she described the plight of women and girls in Syria last year. In fact, Ms Shabaneh’s words can be applied to the at least 630m women and children, who, according to a new study published in The Lancet, face serious health risks as the indirect effect of living in or near a conflict zone. The four-paper series of the medical journal, released over the weekend, provides compelling evidence that more women and children die from the indirect consequences of warfare — malnutrition, easily preventable infectious diseases, inaccessibility to proper reproductive health services, sexual violence and poor mental health — rather than the violence itself. The report explains through the data it has gathered over a decade that the risk of dying from non-violent causes increases drastically when people live in the vicinity of an ongoing conflict.

Citing one case study, the study maintains that between 1995 and 2015, at least 6.7m infants and more than 10m children under the age of five years born within 50 km of an active armed conflict died from the indirect consequences of fighting across Africa, Asia and the Americas. Moreover, according to the research, more than half the world's women and children reside in countries that are in the throes of active conflict. In 2017, around 10pc of women and 16pc of children around the world were either living close to the site of conflict or had been displaced by the latter. Surprisingly, around a third of these women and children lived only in three countries: Pakistan, Nigeria and India, states that can hardly be described as active war zones but that continue to experience intermittent bouts of violence. These findings, as well as others contained in the report, have led researchers to call for a “radical rethink” of the world's response to situations involving insecurity, and the logistics of high-priority interventions for women and children who live in or close to politically unstable environments. As Ms Shabaneh indicated, violence goes beyond the conventional meaning of the word where women and children are concerned. Already vulnerable because of unfair gendered norms, they are the ones who bear the brunt of the conflict

## **Streamlining madressahs**

SUCCESSIVE governments over the decades have grappled with the challenge of regulating the tens of thousands of madressahs that exist in the country, with mixed results. The process had gained renewed vigour after the events of 9/11, when American pressure on the Musharraf administration to ‘do more’ in this regard set in motion the latest set of reform initiatives. However, nearly two decades down the line, little of substance has been done, mainly because of the staunch opposition of the clergy to any government intervention in what they see as their domain. Efforts by the current federal government are also being stonewalled by clerical resistance. As reported, out of the 30,000 or so madressahs in the country, only a paltry number — 295 — have applied for government registration. Moreover, seminarians took to the streets of the federal capital on Tuesday to resist the enactment of the Islamabad Capital Territory Waqf Properties Act, 2020, with religious elements claiming the legislation was “un-Islamic”. While the federal education minister feels clerics will eventually come round to the registration process, there is little to suggest the procedure will be smooth.

While madressahs have always been part of this society, the radicalisation of some seminaries as part of the Afghan ‘jihad’ — a state-sponsored experiment aided by the US and Saudi Arabia — created problems that are still with us. Long after the end of the Cold War, jihadi madressahs continue to contribute to extremism and sectarianism in society. This is not to say all seminaries are involved in violence. However, it is true that the vast majority of graduates of these institutions face major problems entering the job market, as society can only absorb a limited

number of preachers. Also, many parents from low-income households send their children to madressahs because of the free lodging and food that they offer. Therefore, madressah reform must focus on two major areas: ensuring the curriculum is free of hate material and sectarian content, and providing seminarians the life skills, along with religious subjects, that will enable them to find gainful employment after graduating.

Considering the tumult that society currently faces, particularly with the stand-off between the government and opposition which has the support of some influential religious parties, going ahead with madressah reform initiatives will be an uphill task for the state. However, the state cannot afford to abandon this key reform initiative. While there may be foreign obligations to meet, such as FATF requirements, it is very much in Pakistan's interest to bring seminaries into the mainstream. The government must keep channels open with the clerics, while remaining firmly committed to the reform agenda. A U-turn at this juncture will only take things back to square one. Moreover, in the long run, fixing the dilapidated public education system can provide a viable alternative to poor parents.

## Farmers' protest

CONVINCED of his invincibility and riding an unchallenged authoritarian streak, Prime Minister Narendra Modi may have overplayed his hand with India's livid farmers who staged a huge 'tractor rally' in the capital on Tuesday. The largely peaceful protest was planned to coincide with India's annual Republic Day pageantry, and police had to permit some 100,000 tractors and many more people into the precincts of the protected city.

The notoriously pro-Modi TV channels, however, used stray images of scuffles between police and protesters — inevitable in any rally of this size — to project it as a violent invasion of the Indian capital. The patently middle-class claim was more a cover-up for the lethal street violence that majoritarian mobs periodically stage against helpless minorities and working classes with active support of police.

Some protesters did drive into barricaded areas, and one small group climbed the ramparts of the Mughal-era Red Fort to hoist a Sikh flag. Farmers did warn of infiltration by troublemakers into their ranks, and at one media meet they presented a masked man who 'confessed' to have been part of a group planning to shoot leaders and cause mayhem. Opposition parties want to investigate the group that hoisted the flag (without disturbing the national flag in the vicinity) suspecting that the men were planted to give the farmers a bad name.

However, the farmers are back to their peaceful protest outside New Delhi, with the demand to repeal the hurriedly passed farm laws that nobody other than Mr Modi's corporate supporters



wants. It is possible that an unyielding Mr Modi has painted himself into a corner in a politically crucial election year. Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are among the key states due to elect new assemblies soon.

Mr Modi was hoping to exploit a fractious opposition, but the farmers may have actually united them. It goes to the credit of the sagacious men and women heading the protests that they have given Mr Modi a truer reality to contend with, one which makes his penchant for divisive politics and narrow nationalism a less rewarding political platform. If Mr Modi decides not to heed the protests, the farmers too plan to stay resolute. The press conferences their leaders have addressed over the past two months in punishing weather outside the capital have been a celebration of democracy and a will to defend it.

## **A broader investigation**

THE Broadsheet controversy may be poised to open up a Pandora's Box. Reportedly, the government is planning to substantially widen the scope of the investigation into the saga by the one-man commission of retired Supreme Court judge Azmat Saeed Sheikh that it has decided to constitute for the purpose. As per this plan, Mr Sheikh would look into what became of the individuals named in the UK court's final award on quantum to Broadsheet LLC in December 2018. The commission will have the same powers of contempt as those enjoyed by the high courts. It would be able to punish individuals for bringing it into contempt, interfering with its workings, and so on. What it uncovers in the process would reveal the steep price that Pakistan has paid in allowing allegedly corrupt individuals to go free through half-baked and misdirected attempts to bring back their ill-gotten gains from abroad.

On the face of it, the objective appears laudable, and very much in keeping with Prime Minister Imran Khan's desire to 'drain the swamp'. However, one does not have to look far to perceive there may be more to it than meets the eye. Firstly, there is the timing. The PTI has become embroiled in a rather sticky situation with reference to the foreign funding case against it, and is fighting back by filing a tit-for-tat case against the JUI-F. Expanding the Broadsheet inquiry to encompass what are bound to be some of the individuals arrayed in opposition against the PTI government would serve as an opportune distraction from the ruling party's current discomfiture. The sound and the fury could be dialled up several notches to drown out voices calling for the government to present itself for accountability. Secondly, the outcome of the inquiry may also offer fresh grounds on which to denounce past governments as corrupt and incompetent. In other words, the Broadsheet inquiry offers another avenue through which to force the leaders of the Pakistan Democratic Movement on the back foot.

## **Basant ban**

THE Punjab government has again renewed its ban on Basant, after a set of recommendations prepared by the police was sent to the chief minister. The former have proposed enhancing punishments for making, selling and flying kites, citing ongoing injuries or deaths related to kite-flying activities. Yet, the fact that scores of casualties are still reported annually despite the festival being banned for over a decade shows how attempting to solve a public safety issue solely through criminalisation is not only inappropriate but also ineffective. Surely, those involved in the production, distribution and sale of glass-coated wire used in kite fighting must be prosecuted, but does it merit a blanket ban on a centuries-old festival that many consider a part of our cultural DNA?

For each safety concern, more targeted interventions instead of relying on an overburdened criminal justice system can be considered. The sale of nylon and metal wire can be regulated. Local authorities in urban areas can designate spaces for kite flying, and hold awareness-raising campaigns to promote responsible activities and ensure the safety of participants and the public. While this itself can reduce the amount of loose string that ends up tangled on our streets, simply enforcing speed limits, and seatbelt and helmet use can prevent even more traffic casualties. Building codes can be amended and enforced to ensure guardrails are installed on rooftops. Accidents caused by stray bullets are a perennial issue that require stricter arms and ammunition control. Sadly, contrary to the heady, early-days promise of 'safely' reviving this vibrant tradition, the PTI-led provincial government has resorted to upholding the decidedly drab convention of banning outright what merely requires better regulation and governance. And though this benefits the religious right, it is worth asking at what cost Punjab's citizens are being made to relinquish Basant — where once the advent of spring was celebrated with colourful skies, now the passage of time is marked by the gloomy, grey horizon of smog season further down the calendar.

## **Where's the proof?**

FORMER spymaster retired Lt-Gen Asad Durrani finds himself in hot water again. In a reply submitted to the Islamabad High Court opposing a petition filed by Gen Durrani against his name being placed on the Exit Control List, the defence ministry has stated that he has been interacting with Indian intelligence agency RAW and was likely to be involved in future publications against the interest of Pakistan.

Military Intelligence had asked the interior ministry to put his name on the ECL after the publication of a book based on his discussions with a former head of RAW and he was accordingly put on the ECL in 2018. The defence ministry in its reply submitted to the IHC opposed his name being taken off the list saying that he was put on the list for “his involvement in anti-state activities”.

The book that landed the former general in trouble may have raised some eyebrows for its central theme — two former heads of ISI and RAW speaking about the Pakistan-India relationship and related topics. However, there is hardly anything in the book that may be categorised as a state secret. There are opinions and analyses of the two former spy chiefs based on their experiences in these highly sensitive positions but it is fairly clear that Gen Durrani has leaked no national secrets.

Subsequently, he also authored a book of fiction that too does not ‘spill any beans’ so to speak. It is therefore surprising that the state has reacted so harshly to the two books and initiated punitive action against the retired general. The document submitted by the defence ministry, and the language it contains, is even more surprising. Accusing a former chief of the ISI for being involved in anti-state activities is unfortunate. More thought should have been given to the matter before documenting it in such a way. It sheds a bad light on everyone. Of course, this is not to say that the state should look the other way if anyone, irrespective of his position, is found involved in activities that are detrimental to the national interest.

In this case however, such a serious accusation should be backed by solid evidence. The books do not appear to contain any such evidence that may prove that the former general was involved in anti-state activities. If the state has any other evidence that substantiates the allegations, then it would be advisable for it to bring forward such proof so that its case is strengthened.

A better way to deal with this grave matter would be to try the former general in an open court. This would fulfil all requirements of transparency and also show that if solid proof is available then everyone, including a senior general, can be held accountable for his actions.

## **Development funds**

IN another time and place, the decision by Prime Minister Imran Khan to hand out half a billion rupees in development funds to each federal and provincial lawmaker of his party for carrying out schemes in their respective constituencies may not have attracted much public attention. However, considering the PTI’s previous stance on the issue, the move was bound to raise many an eyebrow. It was but natural that this ‘development incentive’ would be widely viewed

as an attempt by the ruling PTI to keep intact its 'vote bank' in the face of growing complaints within the party, especially in Punjab, against the government for ignoring the needs of the legislators to 'serve their constituents'. There is also a view that the decision was made because the ruling party was not very confident it could get the secret ballot replaced with a show of hands as the mode of voting in the Senate elections scheduled for March either through a constitutional amendment or a Supreme Court injunction.

It is common knowledge that successive governments in Pakistan have used development funds to keep members of the national and provincial assemblies happy and buy the allegiance of opposition lawmakers when needed. Also, strong evidence exists that rulers frequently distribute taxpayers' money among their legislators ahead of the elections to win over voters. Such funds are allocated without any formal rules governing their utilisation and, hence, we have seen a significant increase in the throw-forward of development schemes previously. Many such initiatives are either left incomplete or scrapped after a change in government. This hardly benefits the people of a constituency. And so it is hardly surprising that Mr Khan has in the past vociferously criticised the policy of distribution of development funds among lawmakers. When in opposition, he repeatedly pledged to do away with this controversial practice on coming to power, saying the job of the members of the assemblies was to make laws and not get involved in the implementation of development schemes. Until now, he had resisted the pressure put on him by his party's legislators. So what has made him change his mind halfway through his term in office? With the opposition moving ahead with its planned protests in an attempt to force the government to resign and pro-government lawmakers demanding their 'share' in development schemes, the turnaround in his views on the issue could be interpreted as his weakening grip on his legislators

## **US-Taliban deal**

RECENT statements from both the Afghan Taliban and the new US administration indicate that the peace agreement signed between Washington and the Afghan militia in Doha last year may be in peril unless both sides make more of an effort to save it. A statement from the Taliban on Friday accused the US of 'violating' the accord by targeting civilians, though the militia's spokesman tweeted that they remain "fully committed" to the plan. This appears to be a reaction to recent American statements, in which senior members of the Biden administration have questioned the sustainability of the Trump-era peace agreement. A top Pentagon official said that while the US stood by the Doha agreement, the Taliban would have to meet "their commitments to renounce terrorism" and stop violent attacks. While the Taliban and the Kabul government have been meeting to talk peace, violent confrontations on the battlefield

between both sides continue, which has prompted the new American administration to question the Taliban's commitment to the peace plan.

Indeed, it would be ideal for all foreign forces to exit Afghanistan and leave the security of the country to the government. The country has seen decades of instability primarily due to foreign meddling in its internal affairs. However, the Taliban's paradoxical stance of talking and fighting at the same time has cast serious doubts over the peace process, and in this regard the Biden administration's concerns are genuine. If the Doha agreement is to survive, and if the talks between Kabul and the Taliban are to succeed, there needs to be an immediate cessation of hostilities from the militia, particularly attacks targeting civilians. If these processes fail, there is a strong likelihood that the 'forever war' in Afghanistan will continue. While outsiders have played a role in destabilising Afghanistan, Afghan warlords and power-hungry factions have also done their bit to ensure peace is not established in their homeland. Today, the onus is on the Taliban to silence their guns and give peace a chance.

## **Sheikh's acquittal**

THE Supreme Court's decision to order the release of Omar Saeed Sheikh, the principal accused in the Daniel Pearl murder case, has come as a blow to not just the family of the slain journalist but also to proponents of free press everywhere. By a majority of two to one, the apex court extended the benefit of the doubt to the accused, thereby removing a key hurdle in his release.

Although a review petition has been filed, at the moment, there is little preventing Sheikh — arguably one of the most dangerous militants — from being a free man. Given the ghastly nature of the crime he has been accused of, and the long and painful fight of the Pearl family for justice, it is no surprise that both his family and the new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken have condemned the decision in strong words. Dubbing Sheikh's release an "affront to terrorism victims everywhere", Blinken has urged a review with the hope that justice will be done.

The fact that Sheikh, a notorious man who is allegedly involved in some high-profile crimes that transcend borders, will soon be free is yet another startling chapter in his cryptic life story. The British-born militant who dropped out of the prestigious London School of Economics and disappeared into the Balkans — only to resurface later in India where he was arrested then freed in a hostage exchange — has been all too lucky in his trysts with danger.

He is believed to have been a part of the conspiracy to assassinate Gen Musharraf, and apparently was also the person who called then president Asif Zardari, impersonating the Indian external affairs minister from inside his prison cell. He is accused of kidnapping four

foreign tourists in India-held Kashmir as well as transferring money to a militant involved in the 9/11 attacks. The fact that this man has always been a step ahead of the authorities is mind-boggling. Perhaps the world will never learn what his true role was in Daniel Pearl's kidnapping and murder. But despite that, there are enough signs that he is a dangerous man who should remain behind bars.

The entire case points to the sorry state of Pakistan's law-enforcement agencies that have failed to produce convincing evidence that holds in a court of law. The fact that an individual accused of endless criminal acts has time and again hoodwinked the authorities is an indictment of the investigating agencies in the country.

Not only should the state seriously reflect on this failure, it must also tell the world who the real murderers of Daniel Pearl are if Sheikh and three others have been acquitted. If it fails to do so, it will send a message that there is no justice for those who harm journalists in Pakistan, and that their killers continue to roam free.

## Corruption data

A RATHER pointless debate took place in the wake of the release of Transparency International's report that showed Pakistan slipping by four points in the Corruption Perception Index in the year 2020. Since the present government prides itself on its anti-corruption efforts, the slippage undoubtedly felt like an embarrassment since despite two and half years of relentless pursuit of cases against its political opponents on allegations of corruption, it seems like the country appeared to outsiders to have become more corrupt, not less. Not surprisingly, the government deployed a defence of its own, arguing that the 2020 report is based on data gathered between 2017 and 2018 and therefore the slippage actually reflects the country's performance under the previous administration. But a look at the data sources given in the report goes against this claim. The report uses a complex methodology to derive a perception score using data from 13 different reports put out by various multilateral and private agencies. Only one of these 13 publications is from 2018, and that one has data only for 54 African countries so its contents would not have significantly affected Pakistan's score. Three other publications used for calculating the Corruption Perception Index are dated 2019 and all three are based on 2019 data. The rest are all publications from the year 2020. It seems the prime minister's advisers have tried to create the impression that the index reflects data from the years 2017 and 2018 in an effort to avoid having to answer questions regarding why Pakistan's rank has slipped, despite what the government sees as a robust anti-corruption drive underway.

The more important point being raised in the report is missed if one is too bogged down in this debate over which government had the better ranking. One look at the source reports used to calculate the Corruption Perception Index shows that outsiders look at the institutional strength of a country to assess its level of corruption, not ongoing law-enforcement efforts. This is measured by looking at aspects such as the amount of red tape that gives bureaucracy an invasive role in decision-making, or the judiciary's ability to adjudicate without interference of powerful actors in any given country. For an anti-corruption effort to be credible in the eyes of neutral parties, it would be better if the rulers worked on building the credibility of the country's institutions as the primary focus.

## Democracy isn't a tragedy

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has said one of the major problems for Pakistan is the lack of long-term planning. Speaking at a public event, Mr Khan lamented that the requirement of holding elections every five years led to planning aimed at winning the next poll. He said this five-year election cycle was a "tragedy" because it was a major hurdle for the government to think many years ahead. He quoted the example of China where leaders could think long term and benefit from continuity of policy.

The prime minister may have diagnosed short-term planning as a critical problem in governance but he is wide off the mark when he blames the election cycle for this problem.

Pakistan has experienced decade-long continuous rule at least thrice in its history. If continuity was the sole criterion for progress, Pakistan would not have been plagued with governance and underdevelopment issues as it is today. The real problem is lack of political stability often germinating from a lack of political legitimacy. These twin menaces have wreaked havoc on Pakistan's governance structures and continue to create fault lines in new and unique ways.

Mr Khan may idolise the stable continuity of policies in China, but he may want to remind himself that Pakistan is a constitutional democracy and is governed under the overarching umbrella of this consensus document. The tragedy is not that we have a five-year election cycle but that we have been unable to keep up with it. In seven decades if only a handful of governments have been allowed to complete their five-year mandate, then the problem associated with lack of continuity that the prime minister has pointed out lies in the unwillingness of power wielders to let governments complete their five-year cycle.

The prime minister may want to dwell more on factors that inhibit long-term planning in order to get answers that fit more neatly into the constitutional structure of Pakistan. If indeed we want to benefit from continuity and longer-term vision for governance, we need to ensure that



elections are held regularly in a free, fair and transparent manner so that stability and legitimacy are embedded in the democratic fabric of our electoral and governance system.

This structure allows for the type of continuity that Mr Khan is referring to. If a government has done well in terms of its performance, citizens can always vote it back in for another five-year term thereby enabling it to carry on with its policies. At the same time, perhaps all major political stakeholders should agree on some basic economic guidelines that can provide continuity even if governments change and bring in new policies. A basic minimum consensus on strategic issues would compensate for the change in policies and ensure continuity to an extent that is required.

## Vaccination drive

WITH 500,000 doses of Sinopharm scheduled to arrive soon from China, the moment that Pakistan has been waiting for in its fight against the coronavirus pandemic is here. Now begins the daunting task of administering the vaccine to a vast number of people. The National Command and Operation Centre has unveiled an eight-step process for registration and vaccination. An online portal has been created for people to register themselves, and vaccination centres are being set up across the country, with coordination cells at the provincial and district levels. The government has also secured 17m doses of the Astra Zeneca vaccine through Covax, WHO's vaccine support platform, out of which nearly 7m will be available within the first quarter. As with its prompt response when the pandemic initially made its presence felt in the country, Sindh appears to have hit the ground running. On Friday, it presented a detailed phase-wise plan to inoculate its population, starting with 170,000 front-line health workers. Aside from its share of the Sinopharm vaccine it is to receive from the centre, the Sindh government is also planning to procure vaccines on its own, provided it receives permission from the federal authorities to do so.

The real test of the strategy will of course come when the inoculation drive actually gets underway, which should be very soon. One foreseeable hurdle is that online registration will not be practical for many segments of the population, and will surely need to be supplemented by a door-to-door effort. In a country prone to conspiracy theories, where power and privilege go hand in hand, it is vital that the process be completely transparent so it does not become mired in controversy. Far too much hinges on a successful rollout of the inoculation drive. On Friday in the upper house, some senators expressed fears that 'elite groups' such as politicians, generals and judges would be vaccinated first. The minister for parliamentary affairs assured them that priority will be given to high-risk individuals, which include front-line health professionals, the elderly and teachers. The NCOC must continue to provide regular updates on

the inoculation drive as well as disaggregated data of the vaccine recipients to instil confidence among the people. An awareness campaign also needs to be rolled out to counter misinformation and reassure a public where too many are prone to suspicions about the side effects of vaccination.

## Karachi Test win

PAKISTAN'S seven-wicket win over South Africa in the first Test at Karachi has come as a much-needed boost to the national cricket team's morale. The win, which arrived inside four days, has lifted the pall of gloom hanging over the Pakistan camp following the dismal New Zealand tour last month. Indeed, there was much to rejoice for the hosts in Karachi, given the odds stacked against them. Starting the two-Test series as underdogs against a competitive Proteas outfit, Babar Azam and his men were fully aware of the consequences of a defeat on home turf. The selectors, too, kept their fingers crossed after having ceded to deafening calls of an overhaul and replacing blundering seniors such as Shan Masood, Haris Sohail and, Mohammad Abbas with uncapped players.

The confidence of the Green Shirts, who began the Test gingerly, grew rapidly and they turned the tables on South Africa. It was a team effort all through. And yet the two players who stood out were comeback guy Fawad Alam and debutant spinner Nauman Ali. Fawad, who has gone from strength to strength since his return to the national ranks after 11 long years, further consolidated his position with yet another century under pressure to follow up his brilliant 100 against New Zealand at Mount Maunganui. Nauman, who had been knocking on the doors of Pakistan cricket for many years, finally got a chance to showcase his talent and made the most of it. Bowling in tandem with Yasir Shah — who also rediscovered his form — Nauman took seven wickets to get his team 1-0 ahead in the series. However, despite the convincing win, the continuous failure of the top order batting and the lacklustre performance of fast bowlers remain a major source of concern. The South Africans will put up a strong show at the second Test in Rawalpindi to try and level the series and the hosts cannot afford to be complacent. Wise selection and a positive mindset may help Pakistan secure the series.