

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of July 2019

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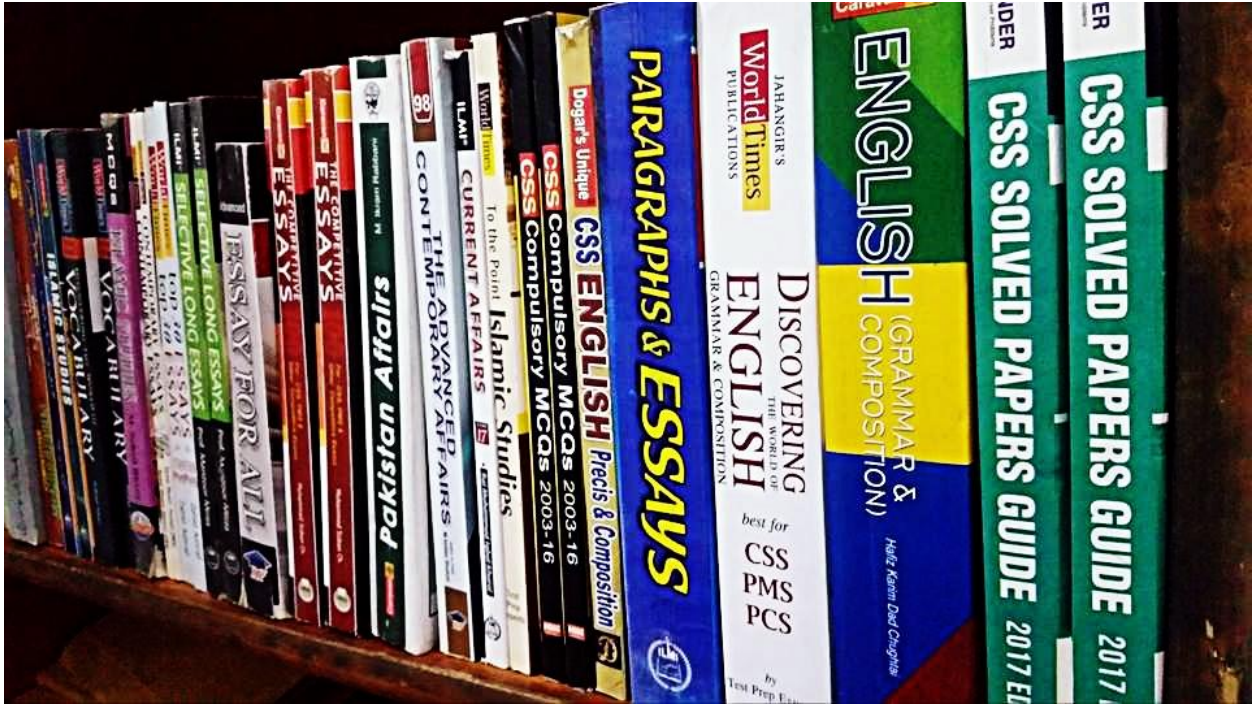
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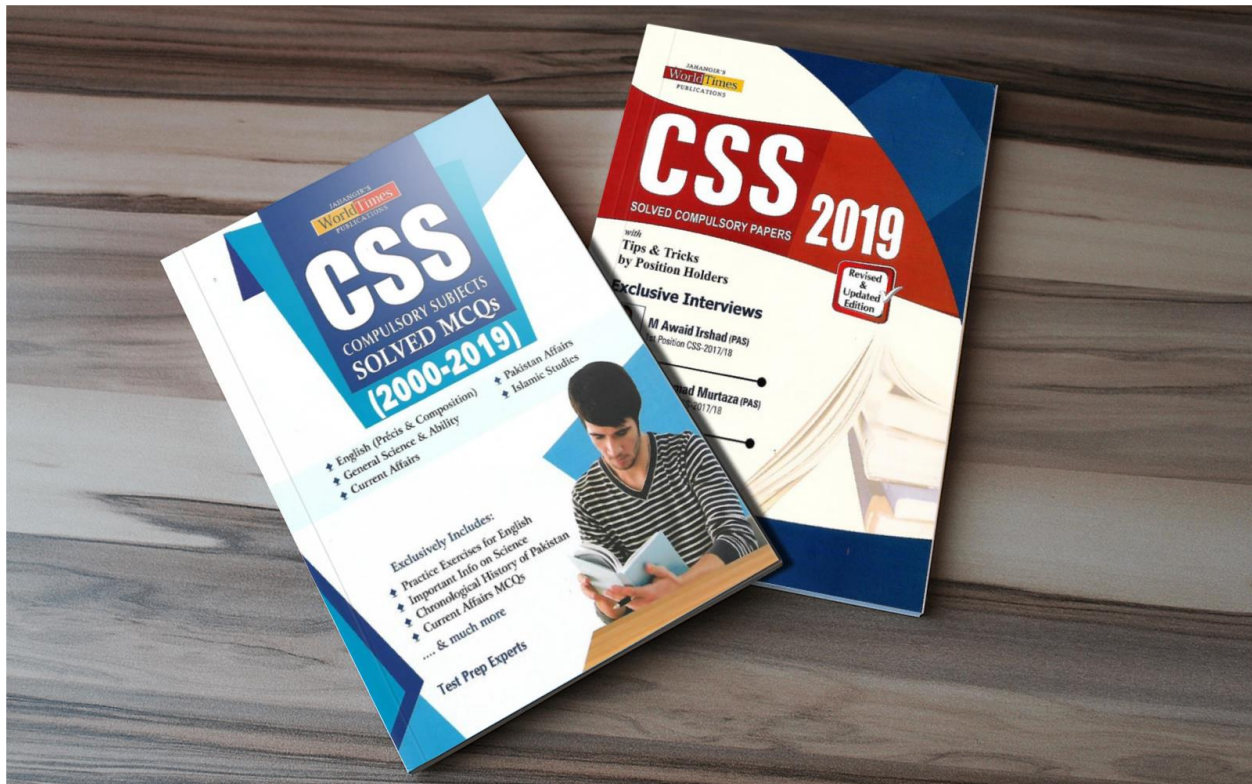
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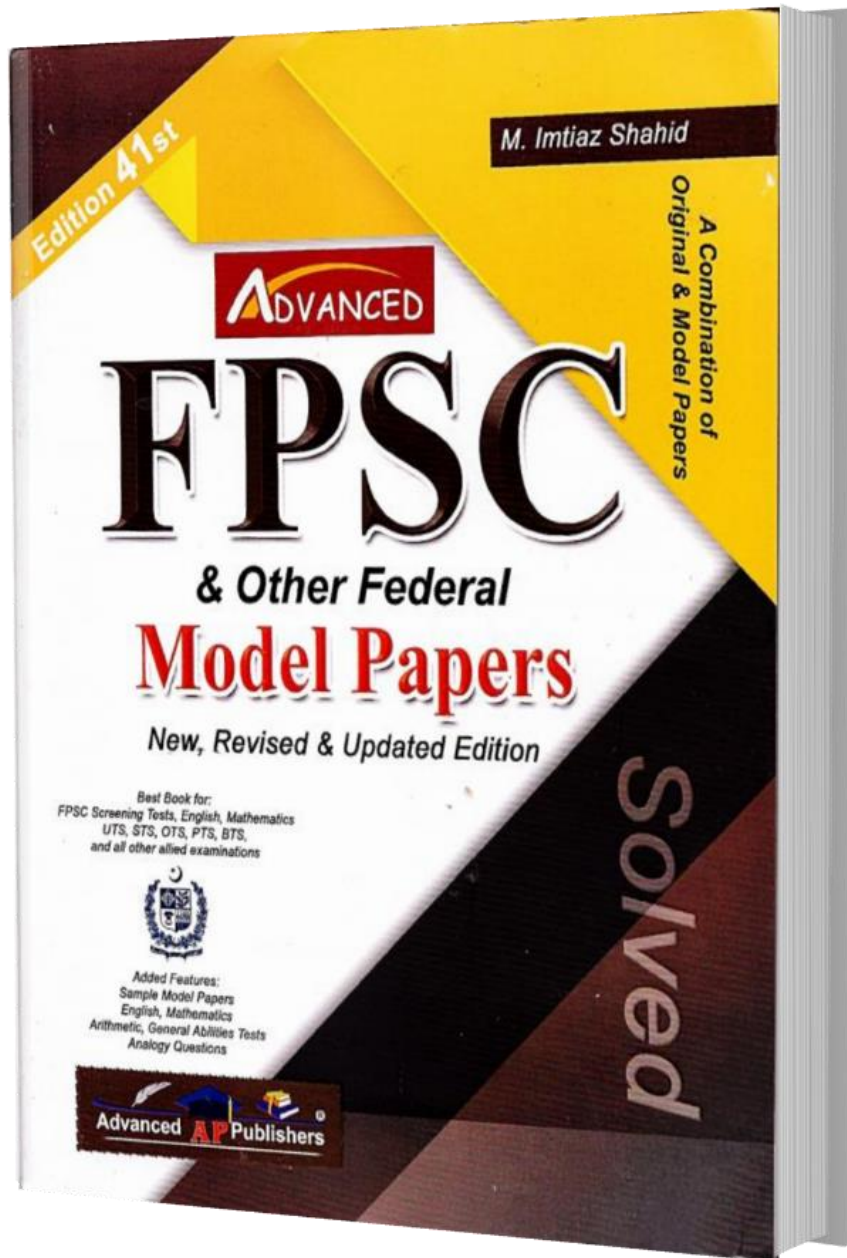
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Budmget adness

IT might be one of the most consequential budgets passed by any government in recent times, yet it is surprising to see how little of its most important aspects have been discussed. The budget is built around a massive hike in revenues and an accompanying need to keep current expenditures in check, with the express purpose of bringing down the primary deficit as per the preconditions set by the International Monetary Fund. Many of the projections in the budget are surprising, such as the overall fiscal deficit remaining elevated at 7.1pc of GDP, only slightly below the level in fiscal year 2019, while inflation is projected to rise to almost 13pc and GDP growth to slow to 2.4pc by the end of this fiscal year. Those who understand would know that something stunning is being described in these numbers. The numbers talk of rising inflation and unemployment and a government struggling hard to do everything in its power to meet its obligations to its creditors. Yet very little of this emerging situation was discussed during the budget debate, where the most highlighted portion of the exchange centred on the speaker's ruling disallowing the use of the words "selected prime minister" in the course of the proceedings.

The tax plan also deserved in-depth discussion. A closer look shows that the burden of the incremental revenues for the year disproportionately falls on salaried people, and is followed by a vigorous attempt to net undisclosed incomes of industrialists and small and medium enterprises, and to document trader incomes. All this is fine and necessary. Tax evasion and undocumented businesses have become a way of life in this country, and the FBR chairman's repeated insistence that somewhere around 30pc of all bank accounts are, in fact, benami accounts may well be true. But the wisdom of doing all this in one go, on the back of a vigorous and muscular implementation strategy that seeks to intimidate people into compliance more than anything else, deserved a thorough debate in parliament. Traders and business people understandably felt that parliament and the opposition parties were too busy with their own issues to be responsive to the genuine concerns of their constituents.

Those concerns revolve around jobs, cost of living, ease of doing business and harassment by government officers, to name a few. This budget and its accompanying finance bill are about to aggravate all these issues simultaneously. The wheels that are ready to be set into motion are larger and more menacing than anything we have seen in well over a decade. That is what makes the budget so significant, yet it sailed through parliament with hardly any imprint being left by the opposition. Let's hope politics is not becoming irrelevant to the real-life concerns of the very people it is supposed to serve.

Terror & citizenship

WITH the emergence of transnational jihadi networks and global militant outfits like Al Qaeda and the self-styled Islamic State group, questions of dealing with captured terrorists and their dependents have arisen, especially when they hold nationalities of Western states. To put it bluntly, these individuals are unwanted by their countries of origin, and due to their involvement in militant activities other states are unwilling to take them in. While some fighters are hardcore militants and need to be prosecuted, the question of underage fighters, 'jihadi wives' and children of militants is far trickier. One method that some Western states have adopted to get rid of unwanted citizens involved in militancy is to strip them of their citizenship; in a high-profile case, the UK recently revoked the citizenship of Shamima Begum, a woman who left Britain to join IS when she was 15. In fact, as a conference held recently in The Hague was told, the UK has revoked the nationality of 100 individuals in 2017. But stripping people of their citizenship is hardly a viable way of countering terrorism and extremism; in fact, it may add to the problem by increasing feelings of alienation. As a former Bahraini lawmaker who was stripped of his citizenship by the sheikhdom told the conclave, states can use the revocation of citizenship as a political tool to punish opponents and critics.

Indeed, hardcore militants who indulge in violence and terrorism need to be punished. However, for underage recruits of jihadi groups and others who may have been swept away by emotions, along with punitive measures rehabilitation is also important. Simply revoking the nationality of such individuals is akin to passing the buck. The fact is that many of those drawn

to extremist groups from Europe and elsewhere have failed to integrate in their home societies, or have been ignored by the state. So instead of tackling the issue of integration and helping 'mainstream' individuals, states pretend that the problem does not exist by wresting people's citizenship from them. Once individuals have been deprived of their nationality, their resentment towards society will only grow, and they may return to extremism and militancy. Instead of simply cancelling their citizenship, a combination of punitive measures and reformative efforts should be implemented by Western states whose denizens have gone abroad to participate in 'jihad'. Leaving such individuals stateless will only add to global security concerns.

Eating locusts

SINDH'S agriculture minister is reported to have offered an out-of-the-box solution as the province faces an attack by a huge locust swarm. He has suggested that the people should eat the locusts; apparently they are "as tasty as shrimps". Perhaps he should go a step further and recommend some recipes. Shrimps taste good in soup and biryani, and are delicious when barbecued. What about locusts? There was a time not very long ago when in some areas of the country locusts were indeed consumed as food, and perhaps it is important to add that they do make for a nutritious, protein-rich meal. The residents of Sindh, who are currently facing the brunt of this swarm, may not need any encouragement from the minister to make a culinary delight out of the burgeoning tragedy that their crops are facing. Indeed, hunger can midwife many other such innovations too.

The problem is not so much in the nature of the suggestion, but that the minister appears to be mocking the difficulties faced by the growers as the pest attack increases. Had this been an off-the-cuff remark made during a press interaction that would be one thing. But it seems the minister has gone to considerable lengths to get his message across through leaflets that have been distributed in towns around the province. In the same leaflet, he has called upon federal authorities to do more to help combat the swarm, particularly by deploying aerial spraying of the affected areas. The question still remains, what exactly has the provincial government done about the problem thus far? There are reports of at least one round of aerial spraying conducted by aircraft taking off from Sukkur, and some accounts of ground-

level efforts at pest control. But there is little indication that the provincial authorities are alive to the magnitude of the problem. This kind of 'let them eat locusts' attitude is what gets the PPP government in Sindh into trouble during times of crisis.

Searing heatwaves

IT might seem like a muted cry for help in these times of turbocharged politics and loud mutual recriminations, but an utterance of literally globe-changing significance has passed unnoticed. For the first time, climate scientists have said that the searing heatwaves that have scorched last swathes of the European continent — from Poland and the Czech Republic to France and Portugal — are the result of climate change that is created by human activity. Thus far, the scientific community has suggested the link between climate change as a global phenomenon and specific weather patterns, even extreme ones. But now we have the first, clear signal from leading climate scientists that a specific extreme weather event is the consequence of human-created climate change.

It would be a terrible mistake to miss the importance of this event, especially when one considers that weather events around the globe are linked to each other. For example, meteorologists who have studied the weather patterns that caused a massive cloudburst and catastrophic flooding in Pakistan in 2010 have identified its link with an unprecedented heatwave in Russia in July of that same year. The current heatwave that has scorched the European continent is connected with weather phenomena from as far away as Greenland and the North Atlantic, which are impacting regions from Europe to the Middle East in different ways. As extreme weather events become more intense and more frequent, no part of the world can afford to be complacent.

Here in Pakistan, we can only sit and watch as climate change wreaks its terrible price upon our society and economy. From melting glaciers, disturbed monsoons, dry rivers and unpredictable flooding, to disturbances in the cropping cycle and searing heatwaves of our own, nature holds our country firmly in its grip. And nature is utterly indifferent to our squabbles and borders. Before we can even talk about what is to be done to face this challenge, we need greater awareness in our society about climate change.

This is not a job that the media alone can do. It requires greater scientific literacy in our society, and greater recognition of the fact that weather and climate are now widely intelligible to the human mind and adaptive strategies exist. Perhaps there is a case here for including climate education in our school curricula, and running more awareness raising campaigns about the human impact on climate and the environment more widely. There is also case here for upgrading our weather monitoring capability, and strengthen the ability of local and provincial authorities to respond to weather-related emergencies. In our present state, Pakistan is a sitting duck for nature's wrath. Somebody, somewhere in a position of power needs to wake up to this growing emergency that surrounds us all, and clouds our future. The only question now is: who?

Return of the missig

IT seems the families of some missing people in Balochistan have been reunited with their loved ones in recent months. Provincial Home Minister Mir Ziaullah Langove revealed on Saturday that 200 missing people have returned home since the beginning of the year. Notwithstanding that details so far are sketchy and the province is closed to any independent reporting or verification, one can welcome this as the first appreciably positive development in a long, ugly chapter of human rights violations in Pakistan. The minister added that such individuals do not number in the thousands as claimed in various quarters. While he was likely speaking in the context of his province, how many have been subjected to this brutality is not the issue. That such abductions have taken place at all is an abomination in a country whose fundamental law guarantees the right to due process. KP's tribal districts and interior Sindh — not to mention some major urban centres — have also seen many unlawfully picked up and disappeared. Demonstrations by family members disconsolately holding placards with pictures of their missing relatives have become a regular occurrence; one took place on Sunday in Larkana.

To its credit, the government has not backtracked on its commitment to criminalise enforced disappearances, and legislation to the effect is on the anvil. Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari also suggested at a Senate meeting several months ago that the prime minister sign the International

Convention Against Enforced Disappearances, albeit with some caveats. Meanwhile, the BNP-M made support to the PTI in its razor-thin majority in the National Assembly partly contingent upon the return of missing people; this too may have played a role in the recent development. Nevertheless, can we hope this marks a change of direction in the abhorrent practice of enforced disappearances that puts us on par with the world's most regressive states? In order to turn the page on illegal abductions of citizens, the suffering of the families of the missing — a form of collective punishment, as it were — must be recognised. To that end, the federal and provincial governments should work closely with organisations that represent the disappeared. That would not only be the right but the more pragmatic course of action. Moreover, there must be accountability for those guilty of such extralegal measures — or, at the very least, a truth and reconciliation commission so that the families of the missing find some closure.

A team is born

PAKISTAN'S nerve-fraying clash with minnows Afghanistan last Saturday, where the latter nearly pulled off the biggest upset of the World Cup, has yet again affirmed the remarkable progress of the war-torn neighbouring nation within a short span of time.

The youngest of the 10 competing nations — attaining international cricket status as late as 2009 — Afghanistan displayed grit and maturity as they fought back gallantly to defend their total, making their experienced rivals grind for every run before going down in a last-over finish.

Just a week earlier, the formidable India had also survived a scare in a fiercely contested match.

Some may still argue about Afghanistan's ability to sustain their act in the field, given their eight losses in as many games. However, none could question the potential and skill they have shown in this gentleman's game over the past decade or so. Their swift qualification for the 2015 World Cup made critics sit up and take notice.

The knowledgeable ones, though, knew that the achievement was not simply born through passion, but by competing with other more experienced associate members for the honour of playing in the World Cup.

It all started in the 1990s, when cricket became popular amongst Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the Afghanistan Cricket Federation was formed.

They continued to play on their return home in late 2001.

Like all sports, cricket was originally banned by the Taliban, but became an exception in 2000.

Afghanistan was elected as an affiliate member of the ICC the following year.

They have not looked back since, and today cricket is one of the most popular sports in the country, having produced many talented players.

Though domestic cricket structure in the region is still in its infancy, the player base is not too large and opportunities to play big teams are rare.

But the Afghans have, indeed, taken the hardship and challenges of the game head-on to script an incredible success story.

Sexual harassment

THERE can be no denying the fact that workplace sexual harassment is rampant in Pakistan — as it is across the world. There are cultural contexts that may differentiate how it manifests here, but our society is nonetheless no exception, and poorer socioeconomic indicators for Pakistani women compared to men exacerbate this issue. Sexual harassment at work plays a significant role in discouraging women from employment and impeding their full career potential. Yet, despite these obvious truths, arbitration on sexual harassment cases — particularly those that are made public and widely reported in the press — remains deeply contentious, even in terms of arriving at a consensus of what constitutes ‘sexual harassment’. For this reason, evolving local jurisprudence on harassment is vital to being able to ensure that such legal protections function as intended.

Ruling on several complaints filed under the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010, as well as the federal anti-harassment ombudsperson's introductory message in the department's handbook, Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah found that the ombudsperson's office had "misinterpreted and misconstrued" the scope of its jurisdiction by interpreting sexual harassment in excessively broad and unqualified terms. The ruling states that an 'administrative action' alone cannot constitute sexual harassment, unless misconduct of a specifically sexual nature took place. In taking this position, prima facie, the court seems to argue in favour of exactness in the 2010 act's parameters. Meanwhile, in May, a judgement of the Lahore High Court delivered perhaps a more expansive interpretation of the law's potential utility. These positions are not necessarily contradictory, but they do point to certain shortcomings that must be addressed legislatively. The law's definitions are fairly comprehensive; for example, how it defines work environments that fall within its ambit easily extends to the informal sector, in which the majority of Pakistani women work. But, given how these all-encompassing terms have so often resulted in inconsistent applications of the law, an argument can be made for describing these parameters more explicitly and with additional specificity — especially for procedural provisions, which are presently too vague and impractical in a number of contexts. Moreover, women's access to this recourse is extremely limited, with only one ombudsperson assigned to each province, and the law therefore ought to be amended to introduce district-level officers.

Lawmakers should certainly work to close gaps that have become evident since the law was enacted. There is a need for legal precision in statutes to ensure wide-scale, harmonised implementation, and to prevent mala fide misuse. And so, while Pakistan has a law covering misconduct of a sexual nature, there are nonetheless other forms of work discrimination that need to be accounted for. Achieving gender parity requires eradicating not just sexual but sexist workplace misconduct and attitudes, including pay inequity, and pregnancy and maternity discrimination. More affirmative pro-women legislation is needed to truly guarantee equal employment opportunity.

Sanaullah's arrest

THE circumstances of Rana Sanaullah's arrest would be laughable if they did not involve matters of such grave national importance.

On Monday afternoon, law-enforcement personnel intercepted the PML-N leader while he was travelling from Faisalabad to Lahore and arrested him in a narcotics case involving banned outfits.

According to a statement by the ANF spokesperson, drugs were also recovered from his vehicle; in a video message, the information minister said the cache was worth between Rs150m to Rs200m.

Minister for States and Frontier Regions Shehryar Afridi while confirming the development said: "He is my colleague but no one is above the law".

Mr Sanaullah was yesterday sent to jail on a 14-day judicial remand by a district court.

There may be many reasons to take a dim view of the former law minister, not least his fraternising with leaders of extremist groups and expressing support for the extralegal practice of fake police encounters.

However, what appears far more material to his current predicament is the fact he is one of the government's most vociferous critics, with Prime Minister Imran Khan himself a frequent target of his diatribes.

Mr Sanaullah recently claimed that Mr Khan had directed the chief of Punjab's Anti-Corruption Establishment to find "some material" to use against him.

How plausible is it that despite being convinced he was in the government's cross hairs, the PML-N leader would be travelling with narcotics worth millions of rupees?

This is as farcical a scenario as when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had Chaudhry Zahoor Elahi arrested for allegedly stealing a buffalo.

Certainly, as Mr Afridi said in reference to Mr Sanaullah's arrest, no one is above the law.

However, when accountability is selectively applied by those in power to browbeat the opposition, it becomes a witch-hunt, a perversion of the very law it claims to uphold.

The attempt to carve out a forward bloc in the Punjab Assembly also seems part of the pressure tactics against the PML-N, even as its top leadership comes under NAB's scrutiny.

The anti-graft watchdog has attracted much criticism for its apparently agenda-driven modus operandi.

Unfortunately, accountability in Pakistan is what the government of the day says it is; there has been no attempt to institutionalise the process and make it truly independent.

The PTI government is doing little to change that.

When the crowing over the opposition's travails is done, the people's confidence in the system will be more frayed than ever.

England-India match

ENGLAND'S easy 31-run win over formidable India in Sunday's key World Cup clash at Edgbaston has sparked a heated debate about the possible reasons behind the latter's lack of purpose in going for the record run chase, especially after the match had appeared within their grasp at one stage. As many as 15 former cricketers and experts, including India's own Saurav Ganguly and Sanjay Manjrekar, have questioned the lacklustre approach and inadequate batting effort by Virat Kohli and his men in pursuit of the daunting 338-run mark. Social media, too, has been abuzz with comments on the snail-paced approach of the Indian openers as well as the uncharacteristic end to the innings by the seasoned M.S. Dhoni and Kedar Jadhav who resorted to defensive batting. India, prior to the England game, had been the only unbeaten team out of the 10 competing, and were heavily favoured by critics to keep their impressive record intact by humbling their hosts. But expedience and discretion took precedence over aggression and the will to win. The awkward end to the match has been just as much of a dampener for Pakistani fans who in a rare instance had backed India against England to brighten their own team's chances of reaching the semi-finals.

They will now be pinning their hopes on New Zealand to beat England and Pakistan to beat Bangladesh.

Winning and losing are part of the game, and more often than not, the results are embraced with a big heart by rival camps and their respective fans. Having said that, factors such as cut-throat commercialism and match-fixing have compelled analysts and viewers to look for ulterior motives of teams involved in an unexpected win or shock defeat. The ICC needs to ensure no outside influences or factors have any bearing on a match. Any untoward instance or unnatural pattern emerging from the game must be investigated to keep the spirit of the gentleman's game alive.

Production orders

PRIME Minister Imran Khan is said to be irked by the parliamentary rule of 'production orders', a convention which allows parliamentarians under arrest to be produced in the house after being summoned by the speaker.

After a cabinet meeting on Tuesday, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Information and Broadcasting Firdous Ashiq Awan said that Mr Khan has called for revisiting National Assembly rules relating to production orders for parliamentarians who are currently facing money-laundering and corruption charges — in fact, some have asked why the rule exists at all in Pakistan when Western democracies make no such provision.

Drawing from the 1973 Constitution, the rules governing production orders have been secured with the intention of protecting the rights of the people by enabling their representatives to execute the functions of their office.

To understand their existence, it is important to acknowledge the context in which they were formulated.

In our political circus, it is not unusual for the government of the day to make accusations of financial mismanagement against opposition parties.

Unlike democracies which have evolved over decades, Pakistan's fledgling democracy is still very much plagued by the phenomenon of politically motivated cases against sitting lawmakers — charges which often do not result in a conviction.

Such tactics have routinely been employed to weaken the numbers of the opposition in parliament and preclude the participation of opposition lawmakers in the house.

For this reason, parliamentary rules allow for the issuance of production orders that permit parliamentarians to fulfil their responsibilities towards the electorate — a convention honoured by Assembly speakers of the past who withstood pressure from their own parties.

In the mid-1990s, Yousuf Raza Gilani risked displeasing his party when he issued production orders for PPP critics — including Sheikh Rashid Ahmed.

The Punjab Assembly, too, amended its rules in January this year to empower its speaker to issue such orders to allow for the production of Aleem Khan, a senior PTI lawmaker who was in NAB custody at the time.

Although it is no secret that Mr Khan has serious reservations against certain opposition parliamentarians, as prime minister he should know better than to make retaliatory statements which put pressure on the speaker to not exercise his right to issue production orders for lawmakers — a situation which will be viewed as the executive encroaching on the powers of the legislature.

Perhaps this prerogative of the speaker can be revisited when the trend of accusations of rigging and corruption without convictions dies out in our country, or when the authorities investigating alleged corruption or election tampering are not marred by controversy.

Till that time comes, it is the duty of the National Assembly speaker to give the benefit of the doubt to the accused lawmakers in custody of the authorities.

In a healthy democracy, parliamentary rules ought to be respected, and not bent to suit the wishes of the executive.

Kartarpur talks

RESUMPTION of dialogue on any level between Pakistan and India is always threatened by elements who wish to torpedo the peace process and keep tensions high.

Unfortunately, ever since the BJP took power in Delhi in 2014, aversion to dialogue on the Indian side has been very clear.

On Tuesday, there was some positive movement when Pakistan said talks on the Kartarpur Corridor would resume on July 14.

However, the martyrdom of five Pakistani soldiers along the LoC yesterday once again proves the presence of elements in the Indian establishment who wish to scuttle chances of peace.

According to the military authorities, the incident, which took place in AJK's Chamb sector, is evidence of "state-sponsored terrorism by India. ..."

Clearly, if there is to be peace in the subcontinent, incidents such as those targeting Pakistani troops and civilians must stop.

Coming back to Kartarpur, there has been much stalling from Delhi's side to the project that would provide visa-free access to Sikh pilgrims from India to a revered gurdwara in Pakistani territory.

India had cancelled the meeting scheduled for April 2, presumably because the BJP was looking to project an anti-Pakistan image ahead of the Indian general election.

Now with Narendra Modi's party firmly ensconced in power, perhaps the Indian government has decided that it can once again re-engage with Pakistan.

However, the Indians have also said the Kartarpur issue should not be viewed as a renewal of dialogue with Pakistan.

The fact is, while Pakistan has gone the extra mile to open channels for peace, the Indian side has shown an arrogant indifference to resuming bilateral talks.

While there are a few glimmers of hope now and then — chance meetings abroad between officials of the two countries or the exchange of pleasantries — these are offset by negative developments, such as the recent violence perpetrated by India along the LoC.

These incidents and mixed messages raise questions about India's desire for peace.

Is the BJP so beholden to the zealous ideology of the RSS — its ideological parent — that it is unable to rise above narrow populism and display statesmanship when it comes to talking to Pakistan?

Yes, there are irritants like militant groups and Hindu hardliners in India who don't want peace between the two states.

But for the future of over one billion people of the subcontinent, more effort is needed, particularly from Delhi's side, if the goal is to revive the peace process.

Repatriating relics

EUROPE has a complicated view of reckoning with its colonial past, particularly the question of acknowledging the theft of art, artefacts and archives from their former colonies. Last year, in a move bypassing French law which prohibits the return of items in public art collections, French President Emmanuel Macron called for the repatriation of African relics to their original homes. In this context, the recent return of hundreds of smuggled artefacts intercepted by French authorities in 2006 to Pakistan in a ceremony at its embassy in Paris might be viewed as a welcome ancillary of Mr Macron's stated aim. For, besides treasures looted under colonialism, the West has an ethical responsibility to curb the continued trafficking of antiquities from postcolonial states with patchy governance. Since it is an open secret that demand from the international art market drives this sort of smuggling, as well as its links with global money laundering, more steps should be taken to ensure financial transparency and documented provenance in acquisitions by both public and private collectors.

Alas, as heartening as it is that a part of our rich and diverse cultural legacy has been restored to us, another tragedy must be acknowledged — this one entirely of our own making. Many priceless smuggled antiquities returned to our government in recent years remain languishing in Pakistani missions around the world, with no news of when the people to whom they belong will see them proudly displayed at home. Meanwhile, there is absolutely no record of the extent to which relics are being secreted away from Pakistan, or whether occasional, chance busts by Customs officials have made any dent in this illegal trade. With virtually negligible public funding, many of our

heritage sites are not even being secured against casual plunder, let alone preserved and restored. Particularly for the people of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a strong case must be made for breaking this cycle of appropriation and alienation of their history by returning these priceless artefacts to their rightful custodians.

Back to the IMF

WITH only the faintest hint of ceremony, this week Pakistan entered its 13th IMF programme since 1988.

That date is significant because that is when the first of the programmes was signed that contained the conditionality for structural reforms. It sought deep reform in the tax system as well as privatisation-related conditions, liberalisation of the foreign currency transactions and the mechanisms for raising government debt, in addition to reforms in gas and power pricing and a move away from a pegged towards a more market-determined exchange rate.

Each programme since then has carried these two dimensions: macroeconomic adjustment meaning more taxes, exchange rate depreciation and interest rates hike followed by structural reform. And in each case the story has played out in the same way: the government takes the money, imposes massive hardships on the population through austerity and 'demand compression', then reneges on its commitments for structural reform through a patchy implementation, at best.

This cycle has repeated itself so often now that if we were to add up all the years since 1988 that Pakistan has spent inside an IMF programme, we would find that the country has spent more time inside than outside Fund programmes. And now we are gearing up for one more round.

The new Pakistan that the ruling PTI promised has kicked off with the oldest of stories — an IMF programme and solemn invocations of a familiar mantra ie 'we inherited a broken economy'. At least the former finance minister — Asad Umar — had the courage to acknowledge this and promised that this would be Pakistan's last IMF programme, meaning he intended to ensure that this cycle of eternal return to the Fund would be broken.

His replacement — Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance Hafeez Shaikh — who is an insider in the world of whispers that is the IFIs of Washington D.C., has made no such commitment.

It appears his brief is limited to ensuring that the adjustment dictated by the Fund is implemented regardless of the cries of pain from the factories, markets and streets of Pakistan. The only structural reforms that he is talking about at the moment is to ensure further revenue mobilisation, and perhaps a plan later this year to figure out what to do with the state-owned enterprises. So much for the Sarmaya Company that was such an integral part of the PTI's election promises.

The finance adviser is preparing us all for what he says are 'difficult decisions' ahead, decisions that are his to make and, sadly, ours to suffer. In fact, there is a difficult question that he himself must answer: is he willing to commit on record that after this, Pakistan will never need another IMF programme again? Unless he answers that question, all the talk about 'difficult decisions' will ring hollow.

Blow to the BLA

ON Tuesday, the US acceded to a long-standing demand by Pakistan when it designated the banned Balochistan Liberation Army as a global terrorist organisation, describing it as "an armed group that targets security forces and civilians, mainly in Baloch areas of Pakistan". With that, the BLA's assets in the US, if any, stand frozen and it is now illegal for anyone in that country to assist it in any manner. The Pakistan Foreign Office responded by pointing out that "perpetrators, organisers, financiers and external sponsors including those glorifying these acts of terror against Pakistan [must be] held accountable and brought to justice".

Gratuitous violence, especially against civilians, is the hallmark of terrorist organisations; it cannot be glossed over by terming it a freedom struggle. Moreover, when groups who profess to be fighting for their rights resort to such actions, they damage their own cause immeasurably. Over the years, of the main Baloch separatist groups, the BLA — led by late Khair Bux Marri's son Hyrbyair Marri from exile in London — has taken responsibility for some of the most heinous acts of violence in Pakistan. With the gathering

pace of CPEC — anathema to the separatists — the BLA appears to have taken a yet more proactive role in the insurgency. In November 2018, it launched a brazen attack on the Chinese Consulate in Karachi; only a swift response by the security personnel present managed to avert multiple casualties. On April 18, around a dozen gunmen belonging to an alliance of separatist groups, including the BLA, singled out and killed 14 bus passengers; the toll included 11 personnel of the navy, air force and Coast Guards, while they were travelling on the coastal highway near Ormara in Gwadar district. On May 11, several of its operatives launched an audacious attack on Gwadar city's only luxury hotel where Balochistan-based Chinese overseeing CPEC projects as well as visiting Chinese delegations are lodged. Given that 'Free Balochistan' banners frequently pop up in Europe — the ongoing Cricket World Cup in the UK has also been witness to an aeroplane flying the banner — money is obviously being funnelled into the campaign. Even as Pakistan is asked to crack down on terror financing by extremist groups on its soil, the avenues of funding for groups threatening the country's integrity must also be shut down. Meanwhile, the gains from the US move against the BLA must be reinforced by the state recognising Balochistan's legitimate claims.

Lahore airport killing

WHILE airports are supposed to be high-security zones, a chilling attack on Wednesday at the Lahore airport has exposed the loopholes criminals and terrorists can exploit to target these sensitive facilities. As reported, two hired assassins shot and killed a passenger arriving from Saudi Arabia along with a taxi driver in an apparent revenge attack. The passenger in question — Zain Ali — was on bail in the murder case of a Punjab-based PPP leader. Police officials in Lahore told the media that the brother of the slain leader had organised the hit from Dubai. But what is more shocking is that the suspected shooters made their way to the arrivals area with relative ease; they had apparently hidden their weapons under the seat of the taxi they were riding in and went undetected through the security cordons.

On the surface this case exposes the rampant culture of revenge in this country; people apparently have no patience with the justice system and decide to settle disputes themselves. However, more serious questions

arise regarding the security at airports, and the preparedness of the Airport Security Force. There must be a full inquiry into how armed individuals made it to the arrivals lounge. Had it not been for the heroism of a police constable, who overpowered the gunmen, the death toll may have been higher. Clearly, a security audit of all airports in Pakistan is in order. In this case, armed men out to kill a particular individual were able to penetrate the security cordon of a major airport like Lahore; if they had been militants, then one can only imagine the consequences. Moreover, in the past there were reports of security personnel using bomb-detection sticks based on 'junk science' at airports. The equipment had been exposed as a fraud when a British company was found to be selling the phony bomb detectors in Iraq. Ultimately, the state needs to take a long, hard look at airport security and plug the loopholes that are putting people's lives at risk.

Documenting assets

AFTER the amnesty comes the chase. The government is now ready to activate step two of its aggressive revenue effort by using the full powers of the benami law to go after those assets whose ownership has been deliberately concealed for tax evasion purposes, or worse, because they may be the proceeds of crime. The practice is widespread, to the point where in many sectors of the economy it is standard practice to declare only a portion of any transaction and conduct the rest in cash. FBR chairman Shabbar Zaidi claims up to 30pc of all bank accounts in the country could be holding benami assets, and he may well be right. This practice has thwarted all previous attempts to broaden the tax net. Not only that, the pathways that it creates for concealing the beneficial owner of any given transaction or asset are all too often used by criminal, or in some cases even terrorist, groups, to carry on business without detection. There can be little doubt that the practice needs to end, and if the government of the day feels that some recourse to harsh measures will be required for the purpose, then that is also understandable.

What is a little more difficult to understand, however, is the prime minister's reported instructions to the FBR chairman to "not harass" the business community in the process of doing this. Perhaps the prime minister's instructions were to apply a gentle hand in the application of this law,

because otherwise it would be difficult to understand how the stated objective of the entire exercise — to promote documentation of the economy — can be pursued without including the business community in its ambit. The business community is the first and largest user of benami accounts, and without specifically including them in the exercise it would be difficult to say what exactly is the point of it all.

The danger here is that the documentation drive could get mixed up with the so-called accountability drive that is running in parallel. If the whole purpose of the aggressive moves being made against benami assets turns out to be to pursue the political opposition, then documentation and other high-sounding economic objectives will become little more than a fig leaf. Accountability is important and necessary, but it needs to be fair, and perceived as fair and evenhanded irrespective of political affiliation. Likewise, documentation efforts need to be aggressive and blind to where the benami assets are held and who is holding them. Without ending this practice, there can be no real documentation, and without documentation of assets and incomes, there can be no broadening of the tax base. Having launched the effort, it is now critical that the government keep it focused where it needs to be, and let politics and economics exist in their respective domains.

Bangladesh sentences

VICTIMISATION of opponents is found — in varying degrees — in politics all over the world, and the politics of South Asia are not immune to this. Mudslinging, name-calling and media trials are all par for the course, while those in power often use the tools at their disposal to belittle their opponents and neutralise them politically. We in Pakistan are no strangers to such unsavoury behaviour, while similar is the case next door in India. But in the Bangladeshi context, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed seems to have surpassed all in the quest to decimate the political opposition in that country. As reported, a Bangladeshi court has sentenced nine individuals to death for attacking a train carrying Sheikh Hasina in an incident that occurred 25 years ago. A number of others have been given life terms for the act; all belong to the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party. In fact, BNP head and the prime minister's arch nemesis Khaleda Zia

herself is in jail on corruption charges her supporters say are cooked up. This is not the first time Shaikh Hasina has displayed a thirst for revenge. After coming to power in 2009, she set up the International Crimes Tribunal to look into 'war crimes' committed during the events of 1971 that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Several opposition leaders belonging to the Bangladeshi chapter of Jamaat-i-Islami were executed by the tribunal, even though a number of reputed human rights groups and experts cast doubt over the fairness of the trials.

By attempting to wipe out all opposition to the ruling Awami League, Sheikh Hasina is laying the groundwork for one-party rule. This does not bode well for Bangladeshi democracy. Much like Pakistan, Bangladesh has also grappled with authoritarian rule; Mujibur Rehman quickly went from hero to strongman while in the post-Mujib era the country saw a long bout of military rule before the return to democracy. Therefore, the government in Dhaka must refrain from using tactics that add to internal turmoil and thwart the democratic process. Bangladesh needs to come to terms with its history. While those who break the law must be punished, there is a clear line dividing the dispensation of justice and a thirst for revenge. Unfortunately in today's Bangladesh, it is the latter which appears to dominate, which is why a more moderate course should be adopted by the ruling party in Dhaka.

Drive against free speech

THREATS to journalism in Pakistan, and by extension freedom of expression, continue to rear their head frequently in the online space.

On Thursday, a Twitter campaign was launched under the hashtag #ArrestAntiPakjournalists, with over 28,000 tweets published in a matter of hours.

Consequently, the hashtag trended at number one position in Pakistan for some time.

A cursory look at the content revealed that this was not an organic expression of public sentiment, but rather an orchestrated campaign with a limited set of messages and visuals — including calls to 'hang' media persons — being reproduced en masse by dubious accounts, of which the

top two identified by Twitter include @IKWarriors and @IKWarrior boasting PTI logos.

Specific targets appeared to be journalists who criticise the government and the military.

This intimidation tactic is blatantly transparent, falls under criminal activity, especially in the case of calls to violence, and yet continues to occur again and again.

Those executing such campaigns operate with impunity, and the perception that arises from the timing of events and the accounts that run them suggest a troubling reason.

Irrespective of whether or not this perception is correct, something must be done to undo the damage such intimidation causes.

Firstly, there is an undeniable chilling effect that accompanies such hostility, leading to greater caution on the part of those targeted, and consequently less free speech when it comes to state matters.

Secondly, it creates a false narrative, misleading the public directly through misinformation within the information broadcast, and indirectly by suggesting this is what people truly think.

Thirdly, while this may not be the intent of those using such scare tactics, their messages may embolden a small minority of individuals to pursue real-world violence against journalists.

Lastly, it creates a bad impression for outsiders seeing such transparent attacks on Pakistani citizens.

It is up to the state to take notice of these activities and to end them quickly and conclusively, or suffer the consequences of allowing online hate speech when it is they who become the target.

Politicians' assets

AFTER every election, a hardly noticed series of disclosures flutters past our screens. As part of the election ritual, all contestants are required to

declare their assets as well as reveal what expenses were incurred during their poll campaign. This material is made public by the Election Commission of Pakistan afterwards. In most cases, the data attracts little more than general curiosity, such as the declaration by current Prime Minister Imran Khan that he owns four goats, but is not considered of much value beyond this. The purpose of both declarations — assets and election expenses — are clear. In the case of election expenses, there is a legally mandated limit to how much a candidate can spend during the poll campaign, though this amount is not difficult to circumvent. And in the case of an asset declaration, voters can see whether or not their candidate has enriched himself or herself while in office. Both these declarations are easy to circumvent using benami assets and beneficiaries, but despite that it can be argued that they serve a purpose and should be retained.

The only question that remains is what that purpose might be. Perhaps a more strenuous effort is needed to scrutinise these declarations, particularly those related to assets, and try to discern patterns within them that might point towards deception. There are any number of MNAs, for instance, who declare barely any assets yet live like kings. It is surprising how little effort is made to reconcile these declarations with income tax filings of the candidates, especially considering that until recently, the majority of the MNAs did not even file returns. Simply asking for a declaration and posting it on the website is a meaningless exercise, and is likely to generate little more than salacious gossip.

The first thing that needs to be done is that the data from asset declarations going back to the 1988 elections needs to be processed into a form that renders it comparable across time, and all of it should be posted online. That way voters can see, in the case of those leaders who have contested and won multiple times in that time period, how the material circumstances of their candidate have changed over time, at least as per the official declarations. Given how the noose is tightening around benami practices, presumably it will become more and more difficult for those running for elected office to conceal their assets. Of course, how strenuous this drive becomes remains to be seen. In the meantime, perhaps the ECP can recruit the services of some election watchdog group or external consultant to process the information it has from multiple asset declarations over the decades, and initiate work on making it available to the general public in a

more accessible format. That would be a start to making the exercise more meaningful.

World Cup takeaway

PAKISTAN are out of the ICC Cricket World Cup after playing matches that both thrilled and disappointed.

With three losses, a solitary win and a washout in the first half, Pakistan earned the ire of fans for its display of mediocre cricket. And then came the turnaround where they redeemed themselves by beating four teams and putting themselves back in the race for the semi-final spot before being edged out on the scoring rate by New Zealand.

Read: 5 takeaways from Pakistan's luckless World Cup campaign

A mercurial team that oscillates between sublime cricket and farce, and are cursed with a legendary ability to self-destruct, Pakistan entered the World Cup as the proverbial dark horse.

They lived up to the description after the stunning opening game defeat to the lowly ranked West Indies and then beating favourites including England, New Zealand and Bangladesh.

But in the final analysis, Pakistan cricket's inherent troubles got the better of them. Besides political interference, that has seen handpicked people ruling cricket, the PCB's failure to revamp domestic cricket and bring transparency and method to the appointment of coaches and the selection of the team have hurt the game.

Since the brilliant Champions Trophy win in England in 2017, head coach Mickey Arthur, chief selector Inzamam-ul-Haq and skipper Sarfraz Ahmed have been boasting about the two dozen players who were shortlisted and groomed for this World Cup.

Those claims have rung hollow as there were at least five changes to the final World Cup squad that arrived in England.

The late induction of fast bowlers Mohammad Amir, Wahab Riaz and batsman Asif Ali, besides the last-minute axing of pacer Junaid Khan and Abid Ali, is indicative of the fickle-mindedness that dented team spirit in the early games.

If Pakistan managed to win four successive games, it is a credit to their talent. Prolific batting from Babar Azam, Haris Sohail and Imam-ul-Haq as well as incisive bowling from Amir, Wahab and Shaheen Shah Afridi remain the high points, though Sarfraz Ahmed's captaincy failed to motivate the players.

The World Cup brings the curtain down on ODI career of struggling all-rounder Shoaib Malik and possibly Mohammad Hafeez. Brilliant youngsters such as Shadab Khan, Hasan Ali and Fakhar Zaman who propelled Pakistan to the Champions Trophy win were a mere shadow of themselves in the World Cup.

Plight of prisoners

MONTHS after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the 'immediate release' of over 2,000 Pakistani prisoners in Saudi jails, a Senate panel has revealed that not a single prisoner has been freed by Saudi authorities. During a briefing by the Foreign Office some days ago, the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights lamented the Saudi regime's failure to keep its promise and also said that details of the prisoners have not been shared despite repeated reminders by the government. According to one official, Prime Minister Imran Khan himself reminded the crown prince of his promise during his Riyadh visit in May. But the response from the Saudi government has been consistently disappointing: they will start processing the prisoners' release 'soon'.

The attitude of the Saudis on this issue is baffling. Mr Khan's impassioned appeal followed by the prince's announcement in February were celebrated in Pakistan as humanitarian gestures that would bring an end to the plight of those languishing in prisons. But instead of making good on their commitment, Saudi authorities appear insincere in resolving the issue — a reminder that the gesture thus far amounts to merely paying lip service. The responsibility for ensuring the release of these prisoners lies with our

Foreign Office, which must use its cordial relations with Riyadh to facilitate their freedom. In fact, as this was a response to a plea made specifically by Mr Khan, it is his responsibility to resolve the hurdles in the way of the prisoners' release. Additionally, the government must seriously focus on strengthening the regulation of labour migration, to avoid exposing thousands of poorly paid Pakistani workers to human trafficking, forced labour, ill treatment in detention overseas and even the risk of death. It must work to increase oversight of recruitment procedures and ensure that overseas employment promoters are licensed and accountable. Vulnerable migrant workers must have consular access before, during, and after they are incarcerated. Filling the gaps in labour migration laws and enforcing existing ones can protect low-wage migrant workers from exploitation and human trafficking.

The team as well as the administrators need to go back to the drawing board to address the ills that have marred the game's progress.

Forsaken city

KARACHI is a city from which the power elite only extracts what it can, and gives nothing in return. Empty promises are made and meaningless platitudes uttered over and over again; instead of even moderately responsive governance, there is political point-scoring; instead of taking responsibility, all sides pass the buck. Once again, residents are witness to what is likely to be another futile exercise in 'deliberations' to come up with 'solutions' to Karachi's problems. On Friday, a multiparty conference for 'stakeholders' organised by the Sindh government reportedly discussed at length various short- and long-term measures to address the water crisis in the city.

The truth is, there are no stakeholders in the city except for its hapless residents who live amidst its urban decay, the piles of garbage, the overflowing sewers, the absence of a mass transit system, and so on. Despite being Pakistan's largest city and its financial heart, Karachi has no unified command structure to address its infrastructural and civic needs. The MQM-dominated Karachi administration argues, correctly, that the KMC's core functions — such as water, sewage and collection of solid waste — and revenue-generating departments have been usurped by the PPP's

provincial government through the 2013 local government law. Certainly, the PPP, having acted thus to render the MQM toothless in its stronghold, has demonstrated criminal neglect towards the city. In effect, it has made the residents hostage to its political expediency. It is also worth recalling, however, that when the MQM had undisputed control in Karachi, it served its own interests far more diligently than that of the residents. The party was the driving force behind the illegal practice colloquially known as ‘china cutting’ which swallowed up parks, amenity plots etc and buried them under shopping malls and residential housing. Its leadership also colluded in allowing encroachment on land reserved for the water treatment plant in Mehmoodabad, one of three such existing plants in the megalopolis — all of which are non-functional. Multiple landowning bodies in Karachi also complicate the picture and make it easier to feign helplessness. The federal government too, gives little more than cursory attention — a project here, a project there, without any sustained monitoring — to a city that generates around 55pc of the country’s tax revenues.

The official indifference towards Karachi is all the more galling when one considers how members of the corrupt power elite, hand in glove with ruthless land grabbers and a venal bureaucracy, are minting fortunes from its precious real estate. On the one hand, the loot and plunder is destroying the city’s green belt with inevitable and serious consequences for the environment. On the other, high-rises are coming up within already congested areas of the metropolis, with the lack of urban planning putting further strain on a crumbling infrastructure. The custodians of this benighted city, it seems, are only interested in enriching themselves.

Awareness of abuse

THIS year it was Farishta; the year before, Zainab — this in a country where the 2015 discovery of the Kasur child pornography ring had already begun to feel like a distant fever dream. Years before, the disappearances of scores of boys in Lahore went unnoticed until the killer himself came forward. Back in 2000, their gruesome deaths moved the sentencing judge to describe a similarly macabre manner of execution. Last year, the idea of public executions was again stoked during the media spectacle surrounding Zainab’s case. What garnered significantly less attention was that, in 2018

alone, over 3,800 other cases of child sexual abuse were documented in Pakistani newspapers. These cases only represent the tip of a vast iceberg; there are countless cases of unnamed children whose abuse and/or murders go unacknowledged each year across Pakistan. Time and again, state and society have been indicted for being asleep at the wheel, and each time we have sought to assuage our guilt by calling for retribution — a response both inhumane and inadequate.

Thus, it comes as a welcome sign that, on Thursday, the ‘Protect Our Children’ awareness campaign was launched by the Ministry of Human Rights with support from the European Union. Indeed, for months, the country’s leading mental health experts have been calling not only for caregivers and educators to be sensitised as well as be able to identify signs of abuse or neglect, but for children to be made aware of their right to safety and bodily integrity. As the primary group affected by such violence, children must be involved by being taught basic life skills to protect themselves and offset the potential for abuse to lead to further isolation and trauma. The stigma associated with sexual abuse is a huge barrier to tackling this societal scourge. It cannot be eradicated by limiting the onus of having these important conversations with children to parents alone. Schools must be seen as safe spaces that equip students with all the necessary tools needed to survive and thrive. While it remains to be seen how much this aspect will be taken up by the campaign, which would involve federal and provincial collaboration to introduce life-skills education in school curricula, other proactive measures have been highlighted. These include the National Commission on the Rights of the Child, pilot child courts, and juvenile justice reform. It is hoped that this important work is never again relegated to the back-burner.

Sri Lanka executions

WERE it not for the intervention of Sri Lanka's Supreme Court, the island state would be set to end its 43-year-old moratorium on capital punishment by hanging four individuals convicted of drug charges. However, the reprieve is temporary, as the apex court has only suspended the sentences till October. Before the court moved in, the Sri Lankan government was all set to go ahead with the resumption of the death penalty, as it had hired two hangmen to carry out this odious task. The events in Sri Lanka offer an opportunity to discuss the demerits of capital punishment, as far from reducing crime and violence, it offers states the placebo of appearing hard on crime without addressing the root causes. Moreover, with creaky justice systems, such as ours, the probability of an unfair trial remains very high, which means states are quite likely to send innocent people to the gallows.

In Sri Lanka's case, the state should consider extending the moratorium permanently. If the executions of the drug convicts go ahead, there is a strong likelihood that the government may extend it to other crimes. However, as opponents of capital punishment have rightly argued, how much of a deterrent does capital punishment pose? If Pakistan's own case is to be considered, the answer is that it is hardly a deterrent. While this country's moratorium was lifted in the aftermath of the APS tragedy, what evidence is there indicating that the return of capital punishment has considerably brought down violence? The fact is Pakistan continues to suffer from militancy — though levels are down, mainly due to numerous military operations — while levels of violent crimes remain high. To deal with crime, an effective police force and criminal justice system are key; this is the formula adopted by those states that enjoy low crime rates. Sri Lanka, Pakistan and other states should realise that simply giving the hangman a licence to kill is not the way to eliminate crime and terrorism from society.

Video scandal

IN yet another scandal which has embroiled the judiciary in controversy, a video purportedly showing an accountability court judge admitting he was blackmailed into giving a verdict against Nawaz Sharif in the Al Azizia

reference has been made public by the PML-N — and promptly rejected by the judge at the centre of the scandal. A day after Maryam Nawaz made explosive allegations about Arshad Malik's so-called confession that he was pressured by "hidden hands" into convicting her father in a corruption case, the judge has issued a statement denying Ms Nawaz's claims and termed the video "fabricated and false". Not only has he rejected the video as one that was made by "twisting his conversations", he has also levelled a counter-accusation against the PML-N, in which he claims that Mr Sharif's representatives attempted to bribe and threaten him into cooperating with them as the case was being heard.

In a land where politics is truly the art of the possible, a claim as startling as the one made by Ms Nawaz should not be dismissed without a thorough investigation as uncertainty would run the risk of discrediting the judiciary. In fact, this fresh episode shines a light on the precarious relationship between the courts and those who wield influence. In the past, Pakistan has been rocked by a scandal which laid bare the executive's collusion with the judiciary when the Supreme Court in 2001 found that Justice Malik Muhammad Qayyum — one of the country's most senior judges at the time — was biased in his handling of the case against Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari. The impropriety, famously known as the 'Justice Qayyum tapes' scandal, hinged on leaked audio conversations between the judge and the then head of the Ehtesab Bureau, who reportedly had told the judge to "give them [Benazir Bhutto and Asif Zardari] the full dose" ahead of the verdict. Not too long ago, then Islamabad High Court judge Shaukat Siddiqui, too, spoke of pressure tactics and intimidation by security agencies to manipulate court proceedings — an explosive allegation which resulted in an inquiry that found him guilty of misconduct and saw him removed from office.

Ironically for the PML-N — a party which has in the past been guilty of interfering in the judicial process — the accountability judge's denial and counter-allegation of attempted bribery is not looking good for the party. However, the fact that the judge was engaging with members of the PML-N is even more troubling. It is not enough for a judge to say that he or she is incorruptible, for he or she must also be seen as independent. Mixing with elements from the political class will hardly inspire confidence in a country where conspiracy theories find their own feet far too quickly. The current

scandal must be investigated by the superior judiciary whose reputation is very much on the line each time the spectre of a compromised justice system raises its head.

Sindh hospitals

FOLLOWING a legal battle, in which the apex court had given control of three major hospitals of Karachi to the federal government, Islamabad has now said that the health facilities will be returned to the Sindh government. This was decided in a federal cabinet meeting last month, the special assistant to the prime minister on national health services recently confirmed. The issue of the health facilities — the JPMC, the NICVD and the NICH — had become a source of discord between the centre and Sindh, with the former saying the Sindh authorities were not ‘capable’ of running the hospitals, while the provincial authorities said that in the aftermath of devolution, Islamabad had no right to run health facilities in the province. The centre has said “financial constraints” are amongst the reasons it has decided to return the facilities to Sindh, while the provincial authorities are saying their stand has been ‘vindicated’ by Islamabad’s decision to return the hospitals to them.

While the centre’s reversal of its decision should be welcomed, as it is in line with the spirit of the 18th Amendment, one wonders why Islamabad had pushed to take over the facilities in the first place when it did not have the finances available to run them. This indicates a lack of foresight and planning on the part of those at the helm of affairs in the federal capital. However, while Sindh has done a good job in spreading a network of cardiac facilities in different districts in the shape of the NICVD, there is no time for the provincial authorities to bask in their ‘glory’ and savour this ‘victory’. The situation in many tertiary-care units in the province is abysmal, with critical equipment missing and a shortage of staff. The condition of basic health units and rural health centres is even worse. While it is true that the province is facing a funding crunch — which the chief minister says is mainly due to a cut in federal transfers owed to the province — beyond money, better management of health facilities in Sindh is needed. The provincial government’s stand may indeed have been vindicated, but much work lies ahead to improve the public health infrastructure. If the NICVD, and indeed

SIUT — both facilities in the public domain — can deliver quality healthcare to the masses, then other public hospitals and clinics can also be transformed in order to give quality free-of-cost care to the people of Sindh.

History in decay

WHEN Prime Minister Imran Khan announced his government's ambitious new policy of relaxing the visa application process for visitors, he also brought up the country's potential to attract tourists of varying faiths and nationalities to religious sites. In that speech earlier this year, the prime minister mentioned the sleeping Buddha of Haripur and the Katas Raj temples of Chakwal, along with a list of other holy sites, to highlight his point. Certainly, Pakistan is host to a number of sacred sites that hold significance for many of the world's oldest and largest religions. However, while many of these locations bring in thousands of pilgrims to the country each year, they remain in a state of gross neglect and are difficult to access. The issue then is not of outsider interest or of Pakistan's 'potential' of being a tourist hub, but one of a lack of infrastructure to accommodate a large influx of tourists. One example of this is the Kargah Buddha, a seventh-century carving of the founder of Buddhism on a high-altitude rock in Gilgit. According to a report published in this paper yesterday, the site can only be accessed through an unwelcoming, ramshackle road that has remained in a state of disrepair for years. Beyond spiritual calling, the location is undoubtedly of historic and archaeological significance. It also contains the remains of a monastery and three stupas and continues to attract tourists largely from Japan and South Korea in the thousands, despite the challenges of terrain.

On the same day the report on the Kargah Buddha was published, another report in the paper noted the Punjab government's interest in restoring historical buildings in Rawalpindi and creating new hill stations, while also identifying other potential sites to attract new tourists. This shows the government is well aware of the infrastructural challenges posed as it opens its doors to visitors through relaxed policies. Whether that awareness will lead to action is the question.

Adjustment without reform

NOW that the detailed documents connected with Pakistan's latest IMF programme have finally been made public, it is possible to get a deeper look at what exactly the government has committed to. One thing that is now clear is that, in its rush to finalise the programme, the government has deferred most decisions concerning any serious policy reform. As a result, the programme is best described as all adjustment and no reform. The depth of the adjustment is serious indeed, testifying to the magnitude of the pressures the government has been struggling with ever since it came to power. However, beyond a fierce revenue thrust and some steep targets to build foreign exchange reserves, there is little else. Some legislation to ensure greater autonomy for the State Bank and the power sector regulator, Nepra, has been committed to, but a closer look reveals that even the thrust of this legislation will be to ensure that both these bodies can play their role to support the adjustment more than anything else. There is a small list of state-owned entities scheduled for privatisation, but besides this there is only a commitment to prepare a more detailed roadmap down the road for what to do with the bigger SOEs. Even on the taxation side, the commitments on the quantum targets for revenue collection are very ambitious and detailed, but the commitment for reform of the tax machinery is vague. "Over time, the authorities are committed to taking steps to transform the GST into a broad-based VAT" the staff document states, and leaves it at that.

Meanwhile, there is nothing vague about the quantum leaps in revenue collection that the government is now committed to. In the words of IMF Mission Chief to Pakistan Ernesto Ramirez-Rigo, "the number one priority is revenue mobilisation". This year's tax plan is already off to a bumpy start, with threats of strikes popping up around the country in the first few days of the fiscal year. But the government has committed to virtually doubling this year's total revenue collection by FY2024. If this year it has to fight to collect Rs5.5tr, by the end of the programme the government says it will bring this figure to Rs10.5tr. This may well be possible, given strong political ownership, aggressive follow-up, reforms to restore trust between the tax collector and taxpayer, and widespread participation in documentation efforts. But it is an uphill battle, and the details of the programme just released show that the climb is a long one.

It is possible that, in the months to come, further structural reform measures will be added to the programme and a more robust vision for putting the economy on a more sustainable vision will emerge. But, for now, all the government has as a strategy is crisis management for three long years.

UN Kashmir report

WHILE this country has for decades been telling the world about Indian atrocities in held Kashmir, Pakistan's narrative is now being confirmed by numerous independent observers. A new report released recently, compiled by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, offers a sobering reminder of the brutal tactics the self-declared 'world's largest democracy' is applying in the held territory. The report says that accountability of Indian troops in the region is "non-existent", pointing out that no security personnel in the held region accused of torture and other abuses have been prosecuted in civilian courts "since ... the early 1990s". The report has also slammed Delhi's abhorrent use of pellet guns, offering the gruesome statistic that over 1,200 people have been blinded by these weapons "from mid-2016 to the end of 2018". While India keeps trying to falsely paint the Kashmiri struggle for rights and self-determination in the colours of terrorism, it will be difficult for it to dismiss the serious evidence of human rights abuses highlighted by a forum as august as the UN. Last month, Amnesty International had also launched a report about rights abuses in the held territory.

While the Indian military machine's brutality in held Kashmir stands exposed before the world, the key question is: will the right-wing government in Delhi change tack and try to deal with this political issue with sagacity? Or will it continue on the destructive path it has adopted? Unfortunately, it appears that the BJP-led combine will opt for the latter course. Just on Monday — the death anniversary of young fighter Burhan Wani — India-held Kashmir was under virtual lockdown, indicating that Delhi was extremely jittery that the occupied region's people would take to the streets to mark the event. It is a fact that, due to India's clumsy handling of the issue, more and more Kashmiris are losing faith in the political process and choosing to opt for armed struggle to secure their rights. This is, of course, the consequence of India's own deeds — as when it locks up moderate Kashmiri political leaders

and treats the region like a colony, the citizens of held Kashmir will only rise up in revolt. There is still time to salvage the situation if India chooses to do so, by opening a meaningful dialogue with the Kashmiris and Pakistan to resolve this issue peacefully. But is anyone in Delhi willing to adopt the path of reason?

Channels taken off air

THE muzzling of the media is becoming more brazen, more dictatorial by the day. No longer is there even any pretence of a level playing field for media outlets.

A few hours after Maryam Nawaz's explosive press conference on Saturday, in which she claimed that the judge who convicted Nawaz Sharif in the Al-Azizia reference had been blackmailed into doing so, Pemra issued show-cause notices to 21 TV channels for airing the "unedited live telecast" of the event. The very next day, three news channels were taken off air, prompting the Pakistan Broadcasters Association to issue a strongly-worded statement. Denouncing the arbitrary action, taken without "assigning a reason or giving [the channels] a hearing", it demanded Pemra restore the broadcast immediately.

It is ironic for a regulatory body to not be following its own SOPs — that too while making flimsy allegations about the 'offending' channels having violated the electronic media's code of conduct.

In fact, one could more plausibly argue that Pemra is guilty of breaching its mandate, which includes expanding the choice available to the public for accessing the news and optimising the "free flow of information".

Indeed, the regulator seems to have become a handmaiden to the repressive forces micro-managing print and electronic media.

About a week ago, former president Asif Zardari's interview was taken off air a few minutes after it had begun, one of several recent instances in which live transmissions were cut off or abruptly suspended without any explanation.

Matters have reached a critical point; unfortunately, self-censorship is facilitating the sinister campaign against press freedom.

In a hard-hitting declaration it passed on Monday, PFUJ, the national association of journalists, stated that some media owners “in order to protect and promote their economic self-interest seem to be collaborating with the government...”.

A divided media is all the more susceptible to being coerced and hounded into submission; that is one of many good reasons for the media to forge unity among its ranks. Capitulation should not be an option.

Litmus test for opposition

THE opposition in the Senate is gearing up to vote on a no-trust motion against the chairman Sadiq Sanjrani, after a request was submitted to the Senate secretariat this week.

Read: First-ever no-trust motion against Senate chair tabled
Although PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has asked that he step down voluntarily, Mr Sanjrani has refused to oblige and said that while the no-confidence move is the democratic right of the senators, he will continue to do his job.

The opposition requires 53 votes to have the no-trust resolution passed. With 66 members in the opposition-dominated house, the strength of the PML-N and the PPP is 50, with 30 and 20 senators respectively.

An independent member of the upper house, Mr Sanjrani was elected chairman of the Senate on March 12, 2018, after obtaining 57 votes against 46 secured by his opponent at the time, Senator Raja Zafarul Haq of the PML-N. The seat had fallen vacant after the completion of the term of the PPP’s Senator Raza Rabbani in March 2018.

The opposition in the Senate has every right to exercise their democratic authority and vote against Mr Sanjrani — much like they voted to elect him last year.

At the time of his election, Mr Sanjrani’s victory was billed by the PPP and PTI as a happily-ever-after story; they touted his election as a triumph for the representation of Balochistan.

It is important to recall, however, the events that led up to his rise in the upper house — a plan that was devised through political engineering and alliance building outside the Senate to weaken the PML-N government.

But as governments — and priorities — change, the opposition now, in the words of Mr Bhutto-Zardari, wishes to remove the chairman whom they brought in. While the little-known Mr Sanjrani appeared out of nowhere as the consensus candidate for the PTI and PPP, the opposition now wants to exercise its power to stick a thorn in the side of the incumbent government.

Mr Sanjrani's election, which will take place through a secret ballot, will be a litmus test for the unity of the opposition. Thus far, the opposition has expressed solidarity through its meetings but its strategy has been erratic and lacks cohesion.

Opposition parties have time and again announced the launch of their anti-government movement, and perhaps the removal of a Senate chairman of the PTI's liking will be their first joint effort to exert control.

But what happens in secret balloting can only be known after the result of the election — the exercise might turn out to be similar to the blow dealt to the PML-N in the previous government when there were hints of defections from the party. Ahead of the vote to remove Mr Sanjrani, two senators from the PPP and PML-N have already expressed their reservations about not being consulted on the no-trust motion.

The ballot will determine how formidable — or fragile — the opposition is.

Sindh's water woes

UNDER the scorching sun, they marched north, from Kharo Chan to Thatta. Approximately 1,500 people traversed 140km over the course of nearly one week by foot. The marchers had a singular demand: the government should put an end to the water crisis they faced. Their lament is not new. For years, the province has struggled with acute fresh water shortages and loss of land due to soil erosion. For a country that contains a number of mighty and small rivers along its length and breadth, it is nothing short of a tragedy that a basic necessity of life cannot be accessed by all its citizens. The reasons for the current crisis are multifold: some allege mismanagement of water, or decry the increase in illegal fish farms and large-scale irrigation along the Indus. Others bring up provincial hegemony, which results in smaller provinces

being neglected and not receiving their due share. Sindh, in particular, is largely dependent on the Indus to meet its water needs for drinking and agricultural purposes. It is supposed to receive 42pc of the shared water from the Indus basin, according to the Water Apportionment Accord 1991, but experts argue the figure needs to be revised as it does not take into consideration the province's current population numbers and changed landscape. Additionally, the mangroves that once protected the coastal belt from sea intrusion have been destroyed on a large scale due to increased salinity in the water, along with rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. Despite several replantation drives conducted over the past two decades, there has been a great loss of land, particularly in the areas between Ketī Bandar and Shah Bandar. According to environmentalists and farmers, much of the Indus delta has now been engulfed by horizontal sea expansion, and its economy and way of life are threatened.

Some have warned of a worsening situation in the near future, predicting large-scale climate based migration. The reality of climate change cannot be denied any longer as it threatens lives and livelihoods. Already, the province has suffered greatly and witnessed both floods and droughts. A water policy that is people-centric at its core and takes the current context of the province into mind is the need of the hour. Let's not forget that water is also a basic human right.

Why involve intel?

CONVENER of the subcommittee of the National Assembly's Public Accounts Committee, PTI MNA Noor Alam Khan, has proposed that the Military Intelligence and Inter-Services Intelligence clear all applications for CNICs and passports prior to their issuance. His rationale is that fake passports and CNICs are being issued to foreign nationals in a grand conspiracy to tarnish our country's reputation. Surely, there are more unremarkable explanations for the kinds of things that might be giving Pakistan a bad name in the international community, and not all of them can be externalised by attributing them to 'fake Pakistanis'. Such sweeping, grandiose statements also have the unintended consequence of doing the opposite of what was intended: casting vital institutions like Nadra, which for the most part perform very well, in a poor light that is not commensurate with the issue at hand.

But the more important issue is: why does a member of this government feel that it is necessary to draw either military or civil intelligence into the day-to-day operations of these institutions? Surely, the services of the intelligence agencies can be sought on a case-by-case basis when additional vetting is required. On a practical level, creating parallel streams of processes will only inject dysfunction into the system and waste resources in the bargain. Moreover, diffusing responsibility to various institutions will not only make accountability against mismanagement and corruption that much harder, it will, in fact, make such processes much more prone to exploitation and misuse. This is particularly dangerous for an issue as important as deciding the eligibility of a person for Pakistani citizenship. And, as the interior secretary pointed out during the meeting of the subcommittee, we ought to have faith in the institutions responsible for this matter. Institutions have to be able to function independently — in keeping with their constitutional mandates. That means not exposing military organs to controversy and criticism by inserting them into political and administrative affairs, and allowing civilian organs the autonomy necessary to function normally.

Taxes and business

IN his meeting with Karachi business leaders from trade and industry on Wednesday, Prime Minister Imran Khan did the right thing by resisting their demands and standing by the economic plan that his government has committed itself to in its latest budget; it has made a similar commitment to the IMF. Some of the matters raised by industry can be resolved since they require little more than administrative tweaks. But others that have a direct revenue impact must be met with a sceptical eye. Chief among those deserving sceptical treatment at this point are the traders, and other service-sector stakeholders. For years, this has been the fastest-growing segment of Pakistan's economy; today it accounts for more than half of our total GDP. But their contribution to the country's taxes has not kept pace, to the point where today the services sector contributes less than a quarter of the total taxes collected. This has to be rectified.

Over the past two decades, successive governments have tried a number of strategies of dealing with the services sector, particularly the traders and retailers, to get them to become members of the country's taxpaying

population. They have launched aggressive drives, tried persuasion, pleaded with them, reformed the tax machinery and simplified and automated tax-filing systems, and used smart incentives coupled with amnesties and penalties to gently coax them into complying with the tax rules. But the traders have proved a supremely obstinate lot, impervious to all efforts. In their defence, they bring forth arguments that may sound fair on the surface, but that no ruler could possibly accept. For example, they complain of corruption in the tax machinery and shakedowns by the local government authorities. But accepting these arguments would mean nobody should pay any tax. The government can discuss their situation, but should not compromise on its demand that they register themselves. There is no longer an excuse for the trader community to argue that they will not pay their share of tax.

But on his part, the prime minister should understand that this effort will require concerted action by his government, as well as the ability to work and coordinate closely with the local authorities. In order to make progress on this aggressive revenue-collection drive that he is now presiding over, he will need to get his public message across beyond waving his fist at the opposition. In his press conference immediately following the meetings, he returned to the political rhetoric that he resorts to at every opportunity he gets, about not cutting a deal with the opposition. This was no time for politics. It would have been better for him to have mounted a more mature and less combative effort immediately following the meetings in Karachi to explain to the public why the revenue drive is necessary.

Train tragedy

But many, like the one in which a passenger train crashed into a stationary cargo train near Sadiqabad early Thursday morning, resulting in a number of deaths, could have been avoided if the authorities had paid more attention to improving passenger safety protocols and investing money in the decaying railway infrastructure, including the replacement of weak tracks and an erratic signal system.

Read: 21 killed, 85 injured in train tragedy

Instead, they prefer to launch new routes for political gains.

The fact that the latest tragedy has occurred in less than one month of a similar accident in which three people lost their lives in a collision between a passenger train and a freight car near Hyderabad should be enough to awaken the railway authorities from their deep slumber.

But will it?

Train accidents are common in Pakistan and rarely shock the authorities. Apart from major incidents, the railways suffer hundreds of minor accidents every year that are either not reported at all or find very little space in prime-time news bulletins. Take the example of a locomotive ramming into a car at an unmanned level crossing and killing two in Rajanpur or the seven coaches of a running express train getting detached from the other rakes near Khanewal the same day, that is, Wednesday. Even major accidents make headlines only for a day or two; cash compensation is announced for the injured or the family of the deceased, and inquiries that never see the light of day are ordered. The accident is then forgotten until there is another similar event.

The government and the railway authorities know very well why accidents take place and what needs to be done. However, they have never bothered to fix the problem.

Governments often succumb to populism and spend the little money available on new train projects and on-board services, instead of maintaining and revamping the aging overused infrastructure or training railway personnel. This approach costs human lives.

Prime Minister Imran Khan too, who took to Twitter shortly after Thursday's accident, blames "ageing, poorly maintained rail infrastructure that has fallen into disrepair due to chronic underinvestment and poor maintenance". He has also asked the railway minister to take emergency steps to counter decades of neglect and to ensure safety standards.

The question is: will his government walk the talk and allocate enough funds for proper maintenance of railway infrastructure, and hold to account the officials responsible for neglecting the safety of passengers?

The voiceless ones

A WORRYING trend of keeping wild animals inside cages and private zoos within homes is reported to be on the rise amongst the wealthiest in the big cities of Pakistan. While frowned upon by animal rights activists, keeping rare animals inside homes seems to have become something of a status symbol (or expensive hobby) with the elite. Photographs and videos of exotic animals for sale — many endangered and some prohibited for trade by international law — are frequently circulated on social media. A recent report published in this paper also pointed to the rise in breeders of exotic animals, who can fetch millions of rupees through a single purchase. In yesterday's newspaper, three wolves were reported to have been rescued from breeders by Islamabad wildlife authorities. Unfortunately, some owners are too ill equipped to care for animals taken out of their natural habitat; the animals die in their possession from medical complications or insufficient diets. And yet, despite all the risks, maintaining private zoos and breeding exotic animals is entirely legal in all four provinces. Sadly, the status of public zoos does not offer much hope either. Most animals in local zoos are confined to small cages, sometimes lacking companionship, and suffer from physical and mental stresses. Many appear emaciated or have health-related complications due to the poor quality of food and lack of medical attention. Recently, a video of a limping brown bear at an Islamabad zoo went viral, leading to a social media campaign. An open wound on its back leg could clearly be seen in the short clip.

Increasingly, zoos are seen as cruel and archaic structures, symbolising lifelong suffering for the animals they imprison, and do not belong in the present century. Instead, governments must look towards establishing wildlife parks and reserves that protect and preserve native species, while simultaneously offering employment, and an educational experience to visitors. Animals may not possess the luxury of language, but they certainly do have rights.

A future in peril

AS countries marked World Population Day on July 11, the figures for Pakistan painted an alarming picture of a future in peril. Currently, the fifth-

most populated country in the world, Pakistan is hurtling towards taking the fourth spot and, going by the indicators, is likely to get there by 2030 — just a little over 10 years from now. In fact, with the world's population expected to increase from the present 7.7bn to 9.7bn by 2050, projections by the United Nations show that Pakistan will be among the nine countries where more than half of the expected increase will be concentrated. The population of Pakistan today is 217m, which is 12m (5.9pc) more than the previous estimate from the 2017 revision.

Owing to the inversely proportional relationship between population and development, or individual well-being, these statistics foreshadow a ticking time bomb for Pakistan. A country burdened by a weak economy, a lack of jobs, finite resources such as food and water, and one that already has limited access to even basic services such as healthcare and education, will only see a decline by epic proportions if drastic measures are not adopted to lower the population growth rate. In a developing country like ours, a population growth rate of 2.1pc — one of the highest in the region — will have a debilitating effect on sustainable development. With a fertility rate of 2.62 children per woman — the highest in South Asia after Afghanistan — it is clear that, unless urgent action is taken, the state will continue to face a rapidly increasing population which it will not have the capacity to provide for.

It is important for the government to urgently turn its attention to population growth management and actively promote a national conversation around family planning. It is unfortunate that the apathy and lack of will that have been the hallmark of successive governments have resulted in family-planning campaigns being put on the back-burner — such inaction poses a great risk to the future of the country. Awareness drives and mandatory training must be reintroduced in both communities and hospitals, with an aim to educate men and women about contraception, birth spacing, and the importance of discouraging young marriages. The government must instruct the relevant federal and provincial ministries to collaborate with regional experts and set short- and long-term goals which ought to be implemented as a priority. There is a lot to learn from countries such as Bangladesh, which saw a successful door-to-door family-planning campaign, as well as Iran, which involved its clergy in delivering the message to the people. If progress is the goal, then the government has no option but to openly acknowledge

the dire population reality and address it while there is still time to do so. Failure to act now will jeopardise the future of millions of citizens.

Sufi's death

OVER the past four decades — particularly from the Zia era onwards — this country has seen a wide variety of charismatic jihadi and sectarian leaders that have created movements and lashkars that have challenged the writ of the state and imperilled its security. Amongst these 'stars' of the jihadi firmament was Sufi Mohammad, a cleric and militant who passed away in Peshawar on Thursday. Founder of the Tehreek Nifaz Shariat-i-Mohammadi, Sufi Mohammad campaigned for decades for enforcement of his version of Sharia in the country, violently confronting the state in pursuance of this objective on several occasions. Amongst his grimmer exploits was the caravan of zealous fighters he led to Afghanistan to take on the Americans and support the Afghan Taliban following the US invasion of that country in 2001. Hundreds of his fighters reportedly died in the massacre that followed this expedition. Moreover, his son-in-law Mullah Fazlullah led the TTP, one of the deadliest terrorist groups in this country's history. While this is not a history to be proud of, there are lessons that the state can learn from the life of Sufi Mohammad, especially his quest to violently take over and enforce 'Sharia' in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The reason Sufi Mohammad and later Fazlullah were successful in creating havoc in the Malakand region was arguably due to the absence of the state in the area, particularly its civilian arm. Because the area's residents were deprived of the full benefits of citizenship due to the state's lack of presence, charismatic rabble-rousers were able to fill the void. And while the military was able to restore order in the area through security operations, the civilian authorities are still found to be lacking where service delivery is concerned. The lesson from Malakand, and indeed all other areas affected by militancy

in Pakistan, is that if the state fails to do its job, other actors will step in, and there is no guarantee that they would be benign elements, working within the confines of the Constitution. To prevent the emergence of militant groups with extremist agendas, both the civilian and military arms of the state must prevent vacuums from being created. While the security establishment must maintain peace, it is the civil administration that has to work to ensure that citizens, even in the remotest and most underdeveloped parts of the country, are assured of their fundamental rights.

Monsoon weather

IN Pakistan, rain presents itself as both a blessing and a curse. In recent years, however, it is the latter that is being increasingly witnessed. The Met department has predicted a weeklong spell of heavy rainfall in many parts of the country. While this will bring cooler temperatures to many and offer some respite from the suffocating summer heat, fears of flash floods and landslides loom, along with heavy winds and dust storms. Earlier, the Federal Flood Commission had warned of an extreme monsoon season throughout the country. The Met department has alerted the authorities to prepare for the worst, as parts of the country receive their first bout of the seasonal monsoon rains. In the meantime, the Provincial Disaster Management Authority in Peshawar has issued warnings and requested tourists travelling to northern parts of the country this week to avoid high-risk areas, while Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar has directed the concerned departments to ensure preventive measures to thwart flooding. The vagaries of nature cannot be altered, but the human response to environmental threats can certainly be improved. Damage caused by flooding in particular is the result of poor planning and ineffective water management in most instances.

Pakistan is no stranger to flooding, having witnessed several horrific floods in Sindh in the past decade. The country's largely agricultural economy and rural workforce is threatened each year by these floods. Even in Karachi, moderate levels of rainfall have caused irrevocable destruction on an unacceptable scale. In the not-too-distant past, Pakistan's largest city has seen urban flooding and power outages due to poor drainage systems; while weak civic infrastructure has led to the entirely preventable loss of life and

property. Deaths were reported from electrocution or homes and places of work collapsing upon the unfortunate bystanders. One can only hope lessons from the past have been learnt, and that the local administrations in the flood-prone areas, along with the federal government, are prepared for any worst-case scenario.

Afghan peace

SLOWLY, and indeed very carefully, the Afghan peace process seems to be moving forward, though incidents of violence also continue to occur in the country. There are multiple global actors — including this country — urging the Afghan Taliban to make peace with the rulers in Kabul, and while the militia continues to posture and indulge in violence, there are also signs that there is some sort of flexibility within Taliban ranks where dialogue is concerned. A few days ago, in Doha, members of the militia met Afghan politicians and civil society activists, with the latter two appearing in a ‘personal’ capacity, and discussed numerous issues. While the Taliban maintain their rigid stance of not talking to the Ashraf Ghani-led government, there have been some positive outcomes of the latest conclave in Doha. Most notably, all participants agreed to bring down civilian casualties in the country to “zero” and to ensure the security of schools, hospitals and markets. Considering the fact that Afghanistan continues to suffer from violent attacks, and civilians continue to get caught in the crossfire between the Taliban and the government, the pledge to end bloodshed targeting non-combatants needs to be welcomed.

Elsewhere on the Afghan front, the US, Russia and China have recognised this country’s role in facilitating the Afghan peace process. In a statement issued by the US State Department, it was said that “Pakistan can play an important role in facilitating peace in Afghanistan”. Indeed, considering the long border this country shares with Afghanistan, and the fact that instability in the latter country directly affects Pakistan, Islamabad has a key role in helping bring this protracted conflict to an end. Moreover, while the US, China and Russia, along with other regional states, are playing important roles in trying to end the conflict, Afghanistan’s other neighbours — especially Iran, Uzbekistan and the Central Asian states — must also be involved in the peace process. Due to geographical and ethnolinguistic links

with the parties within Afghanistan, it is essential that these neighbours are on board, as just like Pakistan they too are affected by Afghan instability. Though this may be anathema to the US, particularly when it comes to involving Iran, Tehran cannot be ignored in the effort to iron out an Afghan peace deal.

However, it should be reiterated that despite the best intentions of all of Afghanistan's neighbours and world powers, the peace process must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. It is important that the Taliban shed their rigidity and talk directly to Kabul to ensure a workable peace. But as a presidential election is due in Afghanistan in September, the militia may be waiting to see where the chips fall before declaring their strategy. The next few months will be crucial for Afghanistan, and it is hoped a lasting peace is reached to help this battered land get back on its feet.

Judicial misconduct

AT a time when the issue of accountability is front and centre, the latest leaked video scandal has shaken the political establishment and the justice system to its core.

The saga continues to unfold, with accusations and counter-accusations making matters even more murky. And yet, it is crystal clear that some spring-cleaning by the judiciary is urgently required.

Read: Hussain Nawaz offered me 'Rs500m bribe' to resign after Al-Azizia verdict: judge Arshad Malik

Judge Arshad Malik's affidavit in response to the secretly recorded video that purports to show him claiming he was blackmailed by 'hidden hands' into giving a guilty verdict against Nawaz Sharif in the Al-Azizia reference is extremely problematic. In the affidavit, submitted to the Islamabad High Court, the judge says it was actually two PML-N supporters who used a "manipulated, immoral video" in an attempt to bribe and threaten him into acquitting Mr Sharif in the two references in his court.

Even after he handed down a guilty verdict in one of them — the Al-Azizia reference — he was, he claims, pressured into meeting Mr Sharif and his son Hussain Nawaz at Jati Umra and Madina, respectively. Judge Malik also

alleges he was further blackmailed into giving his input for Mr Sharif's appeal against the Al-Azizia conviction.

Whatever the merits of the judge's version of events, he has in his sworn affidavit admitted to actions that clearly qualify as judicial misconduct.

In order for verdicts to be unbiased rather than perceived as having been influenced by personal interests — perhaps for illegal gain or to avoid scandal — there must be a clear line dividing judges and litigants.

Communicating and fraternising with parties invested in the outcome of Mr Sharif's case, and meeting with the former premier at his Jati Umra residence, violates the very basic requirements of justice.

A sound verdict is premised on the impartiality and independence of the presiding judge.

Relieving Judge Malik of his duties at the accountability court pending investigation was the only logical outcome.

However, the matter must not end here.

Even in these eventful times, this is a watershed moment and must be grasped as such to weed out the endemic corruption in our appallingly dysfunctional criminal justice system. The ongoing process of accountability of public officials is already problematic, due to a not ill-deserved perception of investigations being largely tainted by political considerations. The judiciary must meet the standards universally expected credibility of the arbiters of the law. Only if the judges are above reproach can the accountability process have any

Senate manoeuvrings

IN an apparent effort to thwart the opposition's plans for the removal of Sadiq Sanjrani as Senate chairman, the PTI has decided to file a no-confidence motion against the PPP-backed deputy Senate chairman Saleem Mandviwalla. The ruling party's decision comes just days after the opposition asked Mr Sanjrani to resign and weeks ahead of a vote in the upper house to determine his fate. Unsurprisingly, the PTI is displeased with the opposition's attempts to remove the chairman, with the Leader of the House

in the Senate Shibli Faraz declaring that Mr Sanjrani is running the house impartially. Mr Faraz criticised the opposition's move as a "violation of the concept of continuity" and a bid to force the government to "soften accountability".

Although the PTI is well within its constitutional rights in demanding a counter no-confidence vote, its justification that such an effort violates continuity is ironic given its own role in last year's election for Senate chair, when the PPP and PTI joined forces to instal Mr Sanjrani — a little-known candidate — as chairman. The PTI's stance today that a similar attempt by the opposition to oust the chairman is a violation is incongruous with its past position. It appears that the ruling party is going all out to exert pressure on the opposition and broker some sort of a deal to resolve the chairman issue. The PTI is already in talks with disgruntled lawmakers from the opposition ranks who have privately expressed their displeasure over the lack of communication of their parties. Mr Faraz has even boasted that in 2015, the PTI had only five senators but managed to secure nearly four times the number of votes. With all parties actively testing the waters through back-channel conversations, the fate of the upcoming election depends largely on how successfully the treasury and opposition build alliances in the next two weeks. With a secret ballot and a history of loyalties which shift overnight after much wheeling and dealing, the outcome of the vote remains unpredictable.

Traders' strike

FROM all appearances, the traders pulled off a rare show of unity on Saturday. Barring a few places including some in Karachi, their strike call has been widely observed around the country. Not since the late 1990s have we seen such a forceful response from this disparate and divided community. Bringing the 4m-plus registered traders of the country, and their hundreds of associations, together onto one platform is no mean feat. Such a show of force on a national level means there is deep and widespread sentiment in the community that is hostile to the revenue drive that the government is committed to carrying out.

But having shown this resolve, a problem confronts the trader community. Where does it go from here? If the government stands firm, there is little

more it can do to force its demands. Striking on one day, and that too on a Saturday when business is slow anyway, is not the same as prolonged shutdowns. That would be the next test of the mettle of the leadership of the trader community. At this point, the traders' threat of marching on Islamabad seems like a distant prospect. Resorting to a test of wills of this sort will certainly escalate matters, and perhaps carry political ramifications as well, but it will be immensely costly for the traders themselves and is likely to splinter their ranks. Despite the show of force, there is still reason to doubt how far the traders can actually take their protest.

For the government, however, the road forward is more straightforward. This is not the first government to launch an aggressive effort to document the trade and services sector, but it can be the first to break new ground in this effort. Where others before them were brought to grief because of their limited ability to absorb the political fallout, this government has the leverage behind it in the form of support from the establishment. Another reason this government can succeed where others before it have failed is linked to the possibilities opened up by contemporary technology. It is much harder today to conceal the beneficial owner of money than it was a decade ago. The traders have shown immense resilience in being able to shift to cash transactions when they were slapped with withholding taxes for non-filers of tax returns in the past, but even that resilience has its limits. Having programmed the incremental revenues from the documentation drive into the IMF deal, they have very little room for backing down, since that would mean raising taxes in some other sector where compliance issues are not as strident and noisy. Not only would that be bad economic management, it would signal weakness on a scale that the PTI government cannot afford to show.

Chinese investment

THE next phase of CPEC was supposed to have been under way by now, with large Special Economic Zones being opened up and Chinese investors invited to acquire stakes, either via joint ventures, public-private partnerships or direct foreign investment, in various sectors of the economy. All the movement on CPEC that has been seen thus far — power plants, the Gwadar port and some road projects — was only the 'early harvest' phase.

The real game in CPEC was always about preparing the landscape in Pakistan to absorb large quantities of Chinese investments in diverse sectors, ranging from electronic appliances to cement, automobiles, metals and mining — with a special focus on agriculture. The sweeping vision laid down in the Long-Term Plan was an indication of what is to come.

But it seems that at least two years have been wasted — there has been a prolonged period of political uncertainty, and failure on the part of the PTI government to find a decisive path forward regarding CPEC. Construction of the SEZs is only a part of what needs to be done to move ahead with the project. Arranging infrastructure within these zones, together with ensuring connectivity to the ports and cities, the supply of gas, water and power, labour and a residential environment for those who are supposed to live and work within these SEZs is a sprawling task. The latter requires a concerted effort by the federal government and effective coordination with provincial authorities. In agricultural investment, the policy environment needs equally decisive reforms to facilitate the entry of foreign investment. The state of limbo that the entire enterprise is mired in was underscored at a recent meeting between the highest levels of the Pakistani government and a large delegation of Chinese investors, led by the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, in which they spoke of a possible \$5bn investment in Pakistan under the CPEC framework. Much work remains to be done before that potential can be realised, though, and it seems that one of the purposes of the meeting is to build upon the interactions that Prime Minister Imran Khan had during his last visit to Beijing. It is time for the PTI government to make up its mind, and resolve whatever tensions it has with the proposed CPEC investments; it should either move the enterprise forward in a clear direction, or scrap it altogether. The state of limbo needs to end.

Permanent scars

FEW crimes are more heinous than acid attacks. In a matter of seconds, the burning substance permanently disfigures victims and alters the quality of their lives. This was recently acknowledged by Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa when he dismissed an acquittal plea by an acid attack culprit, terming the offence ‘worse than murder’. Even though the survivor had forgiven the offender — under what circumstances, we do not know — the chief justice

made it clear that such crimes deserve no clemency in the eyes of the law. The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011, condemns perpetrators to life imprisonment and also penalises unauthorised sellers with fines and jail sentences of one to two years. Since the passing of such legislation, there has been a noted drop in the number of acid attacks in the country — though the appalling crime has still not been eliminated. On July 12, just one day after the landmark Supreme Court judgement, a man in Quetta was arrested for throwing acid on his colleague. While there are several instances of attacks on men, the victims and survivors of acid attacks in Pakistan are disproportionately women, largely hailing from south and central Punjab. The attacks are typically carried out by rejected suitors and former partners reasserting their warped sense of control by brutally taking away an intrinsic part of the woman's identity, her right to make her own decisions, and simply pursue her own path to happiness.

Powerful men nursing bruised egos take revenge on women when spurned, sometimes following years of physical and psychological abuse. Who can forget the tragic, short life of Fakhra Younus, who was allegedly attacked by her husband, a former MPA? Many perpetrators are able to escape their punishment due to loopholes in the law. Since the victims are typically known to the attackers, and already in a vulnerable position, they forgive them due to financial constraints or under coercion. Undoubtedly, Justice Khosa's words will be remembered as a milestone in the fight to eliminate this evil from our society for good.

Reko Diq fiasco

IT had been known for years that the judgement of the tribunal in the Reko Diq case would go against Pakistan — especially when in March 2017, the presiding tribunal determined that Pakistan had violated several clauses of its bilateral investment treaty with Australia by denying a mining lease to the consortium that had conducted the exploratory work in the area. The company invested five years and a reported \$220m before submitting a feasibility study and an expression of interest to commence mining operations back in 2011. The fact that the company was denied a mining lease after it had made the investment to discover the resource and prepared a commercial feasibility study of its extraction, gave rise to the

impression that it had put in all the hard work, only to be cut out of the mining operation.

The mining concession had already become controversial when the Balochistan High Court heard a case starting in 2007 involving allegations of wrongdoing in the case. The high court upheld the grant to the Tethyan Copper Company. But then, in 2013, the Supreme Court picked up the matter, and in a quick series of hearings, struck down the lease. By then, the case had already landed in international arbitration, which began in 2012, when the Balochistan government denied the TCC's application to convert its exploration licence into a mining licence. The TCC claimed this was its right in the agreement under which the exploration work was carried out. Even at this point, an out-of-court settlement would have been possible, and the deal could have been rescued because it lay within the executive's domain.

In its judgement, the Supreme Court cited examples from other international tribunals which found that "where an investment results from the commission of crimes, eg, fraud or bribery, the tribunal possesses both the ability and the obligation to prevent the investor from benefiting from the rights under the relevant bilateral investment treaty". That may be so. However, what has happened in the present case is that fraud and bribery have been alleged but not proven. This is not the first such case, of course. Prior to this, the Steel Mills case halted the privatisation programme, leaving the country saddled with SOEs with hundreds of billions of rupees in accumulated losses. The striking down of the 2006 LNG deal led to a decade of gas shortages, during which we saw street rioting and our industry gasping for this vital fuel. The Karkey and Broadsheet cases have imposed grievous penalties of their own. Now the fallout from a \$5.9bn judgement has to be managed. Given the massive damage that each one of these cases has done to Pakistan, perhaps it is necessary to consider how far we should allow allegations of misconduct and judicial interference to hamstring the exercise of executive power.

World Cup final

THE English team were crowned the new world champions of cricket for the first time at Lord's on Sunday in what was arguably the greatest World Cup

final ever played. That said, if ever there was a case for a World Cup trophy to be shared, this was the final that merited it. A real cliffhanger that kept millions of fans on the edge of their seats, the match was tied in the stipulated 50 overs and had to be decided in the Super Over where the luckless New Zealand tied again only to lose out to the hosts over the number of boundaries hit. It was a grossly unfair decision. The number-of-boundaries-hit rule belies logic and needs to be revisited by the ICC. Despite the defeat, the support that has poured in for New Zealand has been unprecedented. They proved themselves to be worthy finalists by stoutly defending a modest 242 against the formidable England who were touted as favourites from day one. The two sides fought tooth and nail for the coveted trophy that had so far eluded them. Every run, every ball and every catch will remain etched in the minds of the huge crowd present at Lord's on Sunday. Ben Stokes was yet again the architect of his team's victory as he kept his nerve in a pressure-cooker situation. England had been waiting anxiously for this moment since the 1992 defeat against Pakistan in the final at Melbourne. And though they had failed to make the finals in the past six World Cups, their shock quarter-final ouster at the hands of the lowly ranked Bangladesh in the 2015 World Cup was perhaps much needed to reignite their fire. To their credit, they have regrouped marvellously during the past four years with a band of competent players, and put in hard work to hone their skills; their efforts have now paid off.

This World Cup witnessed many thrilling games and upsets, and threw up many young stars, while bringing the curtain down on the career of others. For Pakistan, the experience was mixed: they lost some easy games initially, but bounced back to win four on the trot. They fell agonisingly short of the semi-finals, but could still take consolation from the fact that they had beaten both the finalists in league matches. However, they need to plan ahead by grooming the best 20 players for the next World Cup edition in 2023.

Expired medicine

A RECENT inspection of the Punjab Medical Store Depot stocks in Lahore has revealed that an expensive drug purchased in 2016/2017 to treat 5,000 patients suffering from both HIV/AIDS and hepatitis 'C' in the province is

past its expiry date. The stock could have been used to treat 1,800 patients. Also, the inspectors did not find any record of the drug dispensed to 3,200 patients. By default, the inspection report highlights the faulty mechanism of drug procurement, storage and dispensation by the provincial government for free-of-cost distribution to patients registered with its hospitals. It isn't for the first time that the 'surplus' procurement of a drug has been reported. A couple of months ago, it was found that the health authorities had bought a medicine for treating hepatitis 'C' in larger-than-required quantities. The matter came to light when provincial hospitals' managements told the authorities that they would not be able to use the stocks before the expiry date next year.

The centralised procurement of drugs is a complex process for which government agencies are not trained as it involves assessment of the right quantities of a drug and the selection of reliable suppliers to provide quality products at the lowest possible prices. Some previous studies have found existing rules and regulations, procedures, as well as institutional structures to be inadequate, and have suggested reforms for the efficient, cost-effective purchase, storage and dispensation of medicines to patients at state-run hospitals. The absence of efficient procurement procedures and accountability of officials responsible for wasting taxpayers' money mean that those involved in the bulk purchase of medicines for government hospitals can access loopholes to make money out of deals with suppliers. Unless efficient procedures are in place to select cost-effective drugs, quantify the actual needs, pre-select potential suppliers, ensure quality, and monitor the entire procurement system, it would be impossible to stop the wastage of already meagre financial resources allocated for providing free medicine to poor patients — and to plug the loopholes that lead to corruption.

Embezzlement allegations

THE ripples created by corruption scandals unearthed under the PTI government have now reached foreign shores.

The UK-based paper Mail on Sunday has come out with explosive revelations that Shahbaz Sharif during his tenure as Punjab chief minister embezzled millions of pounds out of around £500m that Britain's Department for International Aid has poured into the province for upliftment projects.

According to the report, a substantial chunk of the money for the rehabilitation of the victims of the 2005 earthquake was also diverted into the personal accounts of the PML-N leader and his family through an elaborate money-laundering scheme.

Shahzad Akbar, special assistant to Prime Minister Imran Khan, at a press conference on Monday displayed copies of pay orders as evidence that millions of rupees had been illegally transferred from the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority to a company owned by Mr Sharif's son-in-law.

The former chief minister has vowed to file a defamation suit against the newspaper, as well as the prime minister and Mr Akbar.

DFID for its part has issued a rebuttal of the MoS story, saying that "Our robust systems protected UK taxpayers from fraud".

Nevertheless, the allegations are of a most serious nature, and their veracity or otherwise must be established beyond doubt.

If proven correct, they could call into question DFID's oversight mechanisms and imperil its development aid to Pakistan, which is the largest recipient of its international funding.

Mr Sharif, if he is to establish his innocence, must follow through with his stated intention to sue the publication for what he claims is a "fabricated and misleading story".

Indeed, the PML-N, which accuses the government of pursuing a politically motivated accountability agenda, should consider that a successfully prosecuted defamation suit in a British court would present an opportunity for the party to feel vindicated in its stance.

At the same time, one wonders why the government did not hand over what it believes is incriminating evidence for NAB to investigate, rather than extending robust cooperation to a British tabloid — that too one which has been successfully sued several times. Instead, the matter seems to have become yet another media trial which does not strengthen the perception of an accountability process free of political bias.

Moreover, when the government has taken a strong position against media coverage to convicts and prisoners under trial, why was the writer of the MoS story given access to an individual arrested by NAB on suspicion of money laundering?

And why was DFID's earthquake rehabilitation funding directed towards Punjab at all when the brunt of the disaster was borne by people in KP and Azad Kashmir?

One also hopes the government will be more forthcoming about how money was allegedly siphoned from funds handled by Erra, a federal authority, for the benefit of the then Punjab chief minister.

Trump's racist tweets

EVER SINCE Donald Trump became president, there has hardly been a dull day in the White House. It is often from the platform of Twitter that Mr Trump has aired his opinions, ranging from the comical to the downright dangerous. He has taken potshots at political opponents and the media; he has also threatened sovereign states with obliteration. Indeed, it is difficult to know when the leader of the world's sole superpower is bluffing, and when he is serious. In keeping with his crude style of politics, the president's most recent tweets targeting progressive Democratic congresswomen of colour have also crossed the line. Mr Trump has told four American women lawmakers of black, Latino, Muslim and Arab backgrounds to "go back [to the] places from which they came". These appalling remarks have expectedly kicked up a storm worldwide, with many Democrats rightly lambasting the president for his "racism". However there has been an eerie silence from leading Republican lawmakers, indicating that the unrepentant president and his party are aiming to please their populist base ahead of next year's presidential election at the expense of propriety and progressive values.

The US has had a long and chequered history where race relations are concerned. During the Second World War, citizens of Japanese extraction were rounded up in concentration camps, while the dreaded Jim Crow laws enforced segregation and prejudice against Black Americans. It was not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s that these repulsive laws began to be

repealed. Even in the recent past, the Black Lives Matter movement has exposed racial fault lines in the US. But it is unlikely that Mr Trump will exercise more caution in discussing race relations, when he can so brazenly use vulgar, racist tropes to target political opponents — forgetting that three out of the four congresswomen are, in fact, natural-born Americans, and hence have no place to “go back” to. Exploiting race, religion, sect and colour for political gains is a sign of demagoguery, and only promotes the agenda of xenophobic right-wing movements internationally. Is Mr Trump suggesting that people of colour and Muslims have no place in America — a view that militant Islamist groups are also sure to use to their advantage — and that only whites are ‘true’ Americans? He must back down from these divisive comments, lest they filter down to the roots of US society and widen the gulf between Americans of different backgrounds.

Sheesha smoking

WITHIN the past decade or so, there have been sporadic efforts by the state to clamp down on sheesha cafes. This is most ostensibly highlighted in newspapers and on television screens when authorities display confiscated sheesha in open grounds, with the vibrant glass crushed under the weight of heavy machinery in view of the cameras. Other measures undertaken to ‘discourage the youth’ from taking up this harmful activity have included heavy fines, sealing of cafes (though anecdotal evidence suggests this is temporary), and conducting arrests. In 2015, the Punjab government submitted an interim report stating it had directed 133 arrests for sheesha-related offences. The decision to ban sheesha cafes by various provincial governments was always contested, with proponents pointing to the business the activity generates, the communal nature of sheesha smoking amidst a dearth of social activities, or denouncing the overly moralistic language of the authorities and the rise of the ‘nanny state’ that polices, lectures and infantilises. Recently, a senator pointed out at a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on National Health Services that removing sheesha from restaurants and open spaces has led to its proliferation within homes, as many continue to smoke as a way to ‘unwind’ or ‘entertain’. He suggested ‘regulation’ in place of an outright public ban. This led to criticism by doctors.

Indeed, no one can deny the health hazards that sheesha and other highly addictive tobacco and nicotine-based products pose to consumers, even if the scale of the damage is disputed. While research findings on the topic may vary, the World Health Organisation found that regular sheesha smokers face the same health risks as cigarette smokers, and that an hour-long sheesha session is equivalent to smoking 100 to 200 cigarettes. Thus, anti-tobacco activists and a range of medical bodies are correct to raise alarm over the suggestion to relax anti-tobacco laws. While businesses might be hurt and the moralistic language irritate some, there are health reasons for discouraging the activity

Empty stomachs, hollow speech

FOR some, their everyday relationship with food is so taken for granted that it is barely given a second thought. But while access to food is a universal human right for all, millions are deprived of basic nourishment that affects every aspect of the quality of life as well as the nation's economy, health indicators and mortality rates. It is unfortunate that despite being one of the most pressing issues of our times, we rarely hear about food insecurity in mainstream public discourse; celebrity news or discussions on political sleaze take precedence. According to a joint report published recently by the World Health Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Unicef and the World Food Programme, hunger is on the rise in many parts of the world. The report states that over 820m people were deprived of a healthy and balanced meal in 2018, compared to 811m in 2017. The worst-hit regions are in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. (Incidentally, in a world of great disparity, obesity too is on the rise in other parts of the globe, presenting its own sets of challenges).

In the largest continent, the South Asian region fares particularly poorly, with widespread malnutrition, stunting and a host of other mental and physical impairments which are largely blamed on poverty, lack of awareness, poor access to what constitutes nutritious food and the secondary status of women in household decision-making. Pakistan is regarded as a food-surplus country and is a significant producer of wheat. Yet, much of its population continues to suffer from food insecurity. As noted by the

renowned economist Amartya Sen, this is because hunger has little to do with food production and everything to do with the failure of imagination and deficient policymaking of those in power. Despite efforts to increase income and daily wages, inflation is recorded to be at its highest in eight years, leading to predictions of a worsening situation in the near future. There have also been no successful controls on the country's growing population, which directly affects its overall poverty rates.

The State Bank of Pakistan has now come out with a detailed report that sheds light on food disparities in the various provinces and regions. While Gilgit-Baltistan and KP fare relatively well — with 80pc and 70pc of the households surveyed considered food secure — the situation in Sindh and Balochistan is depressing, to say the least. Nearly half of Balochistan's households face mild to severe food insecurity — with 30pc facing chronic hunger. While the political and social marginalisation of the province is no secret, the findings do confirm some of the worst fears of observers and should ring alarm bells in the corridors of power. As long as there is hunger, there will be no peace — and progress will be a hollow dream.

Sudan deal

AFTER months of protests and uncertainty, not to mention violent crackdowns, a power-sharing deal has been reached between Sudan's military rulers and civilian opposition groups. The African country has been facing turbulence ever since long-time strongman Omar al-Bashir was forced to step down in April by the military after 30 years in power; the generals took the step after popular protests against his rule refused to abate. The former president himself was a field marshal who, along with other army men, had overthrown the elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi in a 1989 coup. The latest developments might have been welcomed, but clearly the goal should be total democracy without interference from unelected quarters. Indeed, the protesters have put up a brave fight for repes took place in early June, in which soldiers reportedly fired live rounds at demonstrators. The sacrifices of the Sudanese people must not be in vain, and the newly formed sovereign council must pave the way for an elected government that is answerable to the people.

While Sudan continues on the long and winding road towards representative rule, other Arab states are not faring well. For example, Egypt, the country's northern neighbour, is firmly in the grip of the military establishment after the hope of representative rule, and given many lives in the last few months. One particularly savage assault by paramilitary forces raised by the Arab Spring were shattered with Mohamed Morsi's ouster. Elsewhere in the region, kings and sheikhs with absolute power lord it over the people, while strongmen and 'presidents for life' offer a fig leaf of democracy, but rule with an iron fist. Clearly, the Arab Spring showed that the people of the Middle East want change — principally democratic rule, an end to corruption and the assurance of fundamental rights. Yet these dreams remain unrealised. Of course, democratic rule must be an organic, internal process as democracy cannot be 'imported'. The rulers of regional states must realise that their young populations are yearning for more, and unless they open up their political systems, further turmoil will be the result in the long run. Unfortunately, many global actors who swear by democratic values — the US and Europe, for example — are quite comfortable dealing with the region's strongmen and potentates, and have rarely offered moral support for democratic movements. This has only emboldened Arab autocrats over the decades.

World Cup controversy

THE controversy surrounding the dramatic World Cup final at Lord's last Sunday continues to reverberate in all cricket-playing nations, with many justifiably feeling that New Zealand were robbed of the title owing to a wretched rule and an umpire's error which hoisted England as the new champion.

At one end, the criterion of awarding the World Cup to England over the number of boundaries hit after a tied Super Over is being hotly debated; at the other, the six runs awarded to the hosts over a ricocheted hit off Man of the Match Ben Stokes' bat has become a major talking point.

Many experts, including the legendary Indian batsman Sachin Tendulkar and New Zealand's current coach Gary Stead, have termed the boundary count rule ridiculous and have asked the ICC to immediately revisit it.

Some former players have also said that the trophy should have been Shared or another Super Over allowed after the scores were tied.

However, New Zealand graciously accepted the verdict and chose not to raise the issue internationally.

As for the row over the extra run, the rule clearly states that five runs, and not six, should have been awarded to England in the given situation by umpire Kumar Dharmasena of Sri Lanka.

The umpire's blunder was pointed out by the five-time ICC Umpire of the Year Simon Taufel of Australia, who indicated that the verdict influenced the game though it might not have affected the final result.

The extra run gave a definite advantage to England, or else the final would have been won by New Zealand.

The infamous rain rule in the 1992 World Cup that deprived South Africa of a well-deserved place in the finals should be mentioned; that rule was done away with, following protests from the competing teams.

What the current World Cup debate and New Zealand's controversial defeat have brought into focus is that while the ICC may be a stickler for the 'rules', it will not exert itself to ensure justice.

ICJ ruling

IN a verdict which was awaited with great anticipation by both Pakistani and Indian authorities, the International Court of Justice on Wednesday made its decision in the case of Indian national Kulbhushan Jadhav, a spy arrested in 2016 in Balochistan and subsequently sentenced to death by a military court in 2017 for his involvement in espionage and sabotage activities. The ICJ's findings in this case come a year after India approached the judicial body to stay Jadhav's execution and declare his trial void.

To avoid drawing an oversimplified conclusion which paints only one side as the winner — as Indian authorities have been doing — it is imperative to deconstruct the court's decision on Jadhav with restraint.

The ultimate question being considered by the court was whether the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations applies in cases of espionage, as argued by Pakistan, and whether the denial of consular access to Jadhav can be viewed as a breach of obligations under the Convention, as argued by India.

In its findings, the ICJ has granted India consular access to Jadhav and held Pakistan's argument on the denial of access as incongruent with the VCCR of 1963.

Although Pakistan made several contentions about the applicability of the Convention in light of a 2008 bilateral agreement between Pakistan and India — which makes exceptions for access in cases of espionage — the court found that the agreement did not override the Convention but was supplementary to it.

In a dissenting note, ad hoc judge Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani maintained that the Vienna Convention doesn't apply to spies, and that even if it did, Pakistan had not breached Article 36.

While the court has stayed Jadhav's execution pending a reconsideration of his conviction and sentence, the exhaustive list of remedies requested by India have not been entertained — that is, India's request to annul the military court verdict; its appeal for the release and safe passage of Jadhav; its plea for a retrial in civilian courts.

These unconventional requests by India were rightly not granted as the ICJ is not an appellate court and does not have the jurisdiction to even consider such demands. In fact, it is important to note that the court specifically maintains that Jadhav's conviction and sentence are not regarded as a violation of the Convention and that the obligation to provide effective review can be carried out in various ways. "The choice of means is left to Pakistan," the order reads.

It is now time for diplomacy to take centre stage in Pakistan-India relations, the future of which will be determined by the engagement of both sides on the issue of consular access. Now that the ICJ has ruled on this matter, Islamabad and Delhi must move forward with maturity and avoid hyperbole which may cause hindrance in the judicial process.

The ‘traitor’ label

DISCREDITING the media seems to have become a national pastime. On Tuesday, it was dialled up a notch when the PTI’s official Twitter account fired off over two dozen tweets in English and Urdu suggesting that some journalists were engaged in anti-state propaganda and that certain reportage could be considered “treason”. In the echo chamber that is social media, several hashtags targeting journalism soon made an appearance, with two of them trending at the top in Pakistan. Analysing some of the data, a report in Dawn on Thursday revealed that besides the PTI’s official account, several verified Twitter accounts of the ruling party’s regional chapters were participating in the campaign. The prime minister’s focal person on digital media described the Twitter campaign to this paper as an effort to “educate” journalists which had been “blown out of context”.

The PTI’s antipathy to a vibrant media that presents diverse points of view has become quite apparent since it came to power last year. The party’s supporters on social media also tend to display a rigid mindset that brooks no dissent, a characteristic that by definition puts them at odds with what journalism stands for — not a public relations exercise but a means to hold the powerful to account. Some journalists have in the recent past been accused of anti-state activities; some are still under a cloud of suspicion, deliberately created to silence them and discredit their views as being dictated by a foreign agenda. However, for the government to imply from an official platform that some media persons are guilty of committing treason is dog-whistle tactics of the worst kind and should be roundly condemned. Pakistan, particularly under authoritarian governments, has a disgraceful history of labelling as a traitor anyone who can act as a check on absolute power or who propagates a point of view that does not conform to the official narrative. Let alone others, even the sister of the nation’s founder was not spared. To conflate journalism — or certain types of journalism — with crimes against the state, even while lauding the concept of freedom of speech as a pillar of democracy, is sheer sophistry. Moreover, in Pakistan’s polarised and hyper-nationalistic atmosphere, the dangerous consequences of being labelled a traitor can never be underestimated. There is a vast difference between critiquing policy — in other words, fair comment — and conspiring to overthrow the state. Perhaps the government needs to “educate” itself.

Burial before death

IMAGINE being trapped thousands of feet deep in pitch darkness with little to no oxygen.

Each day, coal miners in Balochistan risk their lives to earn a livelihood, as they enter death traps full of toxic gases with negligible safety equipment. And the body count keeps rising.

Very recently, nine miners died after a short circuit caused an explosion inside a mine in Quetta's Degari area. After nearly two days had passed, eight lifeless bodies were recovered from inside the mine, while two miners were rushed to hospital. One succumbed to his injuries, while the other remains in critical condition. Rescue efforts often prove deadly, and are largely conducted by other miners. In the initial rescue effort in Degari, PDMA members lost consciousness when they tried to rescue the 11 trapped workers.

In any civilised part of the world, the deaths of miners would cause mass outrage, protests or strikes. Indeed, miners' unions were once a force to be reckoned with in much of the developed world, and still continue to be in some parts.

But in Pakistan, miners are virtually powerless, unable to secure even basic rights in the presence of powerful mine owners, some of whom occupy seats in the government. Their deaths have become so common that they barely cause a ripple. The underlying issues of greed and exploitation are quickly buried under more hot-button issues. At best, a few words of sorrow are offered and an inquiry ordered — the standard procedure.

The apathy towards the death of miners and other industrial workers by both state and society should not be accepted any longer.

Labour organisations have recommended that all employment at mines be regularised immediately, with minimum wage and eight-hour work shifts guaranteed.

Second, miners must be provided with medical facilities and safety equipment.

Third, the amount of oxygen and temperature inside the mines should be legislated and notified, while air-circulation systems must be installed. And last, workers have to be covered under social security and EOBI laws.

Politicians in jail

THE spate of arrests targeting politicians does not bode well for the health of the political process in the country. With the arrest of former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi by NAB on Thursday, there are now 12 politicians — the vast majority of them from opposition parties — in jail, with one convicted and the rest pending investigation. Included in this number are two Waziristan MNAs in police custody, who were booked for assault and criminal conspiracy in May but whose production orders are yet to be issued. There are reports of NAB ‘hunting’ for yet another opposition party politician, and speculation is rife regarding the next member of the PPP or PML-N to be picked up. A prominent member of the ruling PTI, Aleem Khan, too, was arrested by NAB in a corruption case, but was released on bail after two months.

There is no doubt that accountability is an essential component of governance. Those who wield power and receive tax money from citizens are bound to answer to the people about the use or misuse of public funds. However, the astonishing frequency with which opposition parties are being targeted for alleged crimes ranging from so-called mega corruption and terrorism to drug possession, makes it appear more like a sinister campaign to muzzle political opponents. The allegations levelled against these politicians are undisputedly serious, but the trend of ‘imprison first, investigate later’ and the sheer arbitrariness of the investigation process bear all the characteristics of a political witch-hunt. Too often, we have seen lawmakers critical of the government jailed, remanded into custody and then left to languish there while a fishing expedition is in full swing. Authorities have the right to question individuals whom they legitimately suspect of wrongdoing, but the ongoing spectacle of dramatic arrests and prolonged incarceration pending indictment or even an inquiry, has weakened the public’s confidence in these investigating institutions. To make matters worse, the media trial and simultaneous smear campaigns against those being probed violate the presumption of innocence principle and cast a

shadow over the fairness of the process. Even if individuals are later released from custody, there is little they can do to rectify the damage that has been done to their reputation.

Regrettably, in this country, the court of public opinion has a tendency to assume that all politicians are guilty of wrongdoing. But institutions must not operate under that impulse. They have a responsibility to build airtight cases with legitimate evidence that will hold in a court of law and ensure that these cases proceed in a transparent and efficient manner. There are certainly more professional methods that investigating bodies can employ to probe these individuals — who now include a former prime minister and a former president. Going after opposition politicians in this manner, without solid evidence, is tantamount to harassment of the worst kind.

Low-cost housing

THE right to safe and affordable housing and shelter is fundamental to tackling poverty and improving access to other basic rights. Recently, the minister for housing and works informed a Senate standing committee that the country is facing a shortage of 11m houses. Housing was one of the highlights of the PTI government's election manifesto, setting an ambitious target of constructing up to 5m low-cost homes that would largely cater to the "poor, salaried class and government employees", in the words of Prime Minister Imran Khan. Financed by the private sector and commercial banks, and built upon state land, the scheme promises to generate new savings for investment and create employment in the country. Previous governments have also attempted pushing for low-income housing schemes, but not on such an ambitious size and scale. So far, the Pakistan Mortgage Refinance Company is said to have received \$58m from the World Bank towards this effort, it was reported in January, while the countrywide scheme was launched in Balochistan in April this year. Although critics have raised questions about the feasibility of the project (there is a glaring lack of finances and clarity, they say), it has the potential of becoming a milestone achievement for both the government and the people of this country by the sounds of it — if somehow successfully implemented. There is no doubt that the prime minister is considered a visionary with unique ideas, but whether he keeps an eye on the messy realities on ground is debatable. Earlier this

year, he also spoke about how he wanted to encourage high-rises as they are environmentally friendly and affordable for the poorest subsection of society.

However, until speech transforms into action and results, it will be difficult to gauge which direction this country is heading in. Given the backdrop of a burgeoning population, a struggling economy, inflation at its highest in eight years, and reports of the most vulnerable people being evicted from their homes in state-ordered anti-encroachment drives across the country every other day, the urgent need for providing affordable housing and regularising informal settlements cannot be emphasised enough. It is also difficult to not notice the anti-poor bias and blatant hypocrisy on display each time the land and property of the wealthy is regularised when controversy about their status' arises, but the same lawful 'flexibility' is not extended to those born into lesser circumstances.

Sindh nurses' protest

IN what is becoming a recurring trend, disgruntled government employees — dissatisfied with their service structure, pay, perks, etc — take to the streets to protest against the authorities. Sometimes the protests are peaceful, but often run-ins with the law enforcers can be violent. In the recent past, 'young' doctors, nurses and government teachers have all staged protests. On Thursday, nurses working in Sindh's public-sector hospitals squared off against police in Karachi as the former tried to march on Chief Minister House. The nurses had been protesting in front of the local press club for around two weeks, and on Thursday, accompanied by PTI lawmakers and activists, they decided to march on Chief Minister House to press for their demands. However, what ensued was an ugly scene as the nurses and their supporters grappled with police. Television footage and pictures captured by the media show a battle royal being fought in Karachi's so-called red zone. The police unleashed their batons on the protesters, while water cannons were also used to push back the nurses. Though the Sindh chief minister later ordered all detained nurses to be released, it is unfortunate that the melee occurred in the first place.

Thursday's events point to something bigger: a trust deficit between the state and the people it employs. Nurses had also protested a few months

earlier, while teachers were baton-charged in March. True, not all the demands of protesting government employees are genuine — and the suffering caused to poor patients by doctors' and nurses' strikes is a matter of considerable concern. Nevertheless, it is the state's job to engage with disgruntled employees and ensure that matters don't reach a point of no return. Moreover, it is the democratic right of workers to stage peaceful protests, and law enforcers must use non-violent crowd-control tactics in case demonstrations take a violent turn. Unleashing batons is totally unacceptable and will only aggravate matters; the state must resolve the grievances of its employees at the negotiating table.

Punjab cabinet reshuffle

DESPITE nearly one year in office, it seems that Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar is still not independent when it comes to running the affairs of his cabinet. This was highlighted recently when the portfolios of six provincial ministers were reshuffled after Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed displeasure with their performance. Following a one-to-one meeting between the premier and Mr Buzdar, Information Minister Samsam Bukhari and five others had their portfolios reassigned. It appears that the prime minister was unhappy with Mr Bukhari's failure to hit out at the opposition in Punjab in response to the hard-hitting speeches being delivered by PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz against Mr Khan and the ruling set-up. The Punjab government had inducted Mr Bukhari in March on the understanding that he would launch an unrelenting assault on the opposition after the previous minister, firebrand Fayyaz Chohan, was removed for making incendiary comments about the Hindu community. Mr Bukhari at the outset had maintained that "my language and tone will be different", referring to his predecessor Mr Chohan.

The decision to reshuffle the cabinet lays bare the extent to which Mr Buzdar's autonomy is limited, even after almost a year of being in office. Mr Buzdar had appeared on the political scene out of nowhere — it was a decision which left many stunned as they had expected the coveted position of Punjab chief minister would go to a prominent and known political figure. Yet, at that time and on several other occasions, Mr Khan backed Mr Buzdar's appointment to one of the most powerful positions in the civilian

set-up. For months after his appointment, Mr Buzdar was the subject of curiosity and criticism, for he was an elusive figure reluctant to engage with the media. There was much speculation that a little-known personality like him was appointed to allow someone else to call the shots — an impression that has not changed. Mr Khan would be well advised to give room to Mr Buzdar to make decisions instead of undermining him and proving his critics right.

PM in Washington

TIES with the United States are amongst the most tortuous — and important — bilateral relationships this country maintains.

Tortuous because ever since the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, Islamabad and Washington have drifted far apart on a number of issues, with many in this country feeling that the US abandoned Pakistan after it gave the Soviets a bloody nose in the Afghan jihad.

Yet the relationship is important as despite the upheaval in global politics, the US remains an economic and military superpower — one that Pakistan cannot afford to have hostile ties with.

Currently, the relationship can certainly use much tweaking, and perhaps that is what Prime Minister Imran Khan plans to do as he begins his visit to Washington.

To be sure, the optics are quite odd, as along with other officials, Mr Khan has also included the army chief and the ISI head in the delegation.

This may be one of the rare occasions where a head of government is accompanied by the country's army chief in the meeting with the US president.

Some in Washington may interpret this as weakness on part of the civilian government, while others will ask if Mr Khan has his own reasons for taking him along.

He may well want to send a message to Washington (as well as to his domestic audience) that the civilian and military leadership are on the same page.

Also, since the time of Independence, the military-to-military relationship has been a primary pillar of Pakistan-US ties.

Where the Trump administration is concerned, it views Pakistan primarily through the lens of Afghanistan, while also focusing on counterterrorism.

Although it would be idealistic to assume that this history will be brushed aside and a wide-ranging relationship created after this trip, what is entirely possible is for Pakistan to convince the US that besides military ties, this country's views on a wide number of issues must also be considered.

So far, under Mr Trump's watch the relationship has been quite bumpy, a continuation in many ways of what ties were under the Obama administration — the Pakistan-US relationship has yet to move beyond the 'do more plus'.

True, Afghanistan is important, and there is a realisation in America that without Pakistan's involvement, stability is not possible in the region.

It is also in Pakistan's interest to eliminate all transnational militant groups that may be using its soil for terrorism purposes.

But beyond these two issues, Washington needs to pay heed to Pakistan's concerns on Indian interference in Balochistan, and support in the US for separatists in the province.

The US-India relationship must not come at the cost of isolating this country.

As far as relationships with other regional states — especially China and Iran — go, the US would be better off understanding Pakistan's policies and commitments, instead of punishing it for pursuing an independent foreign policy.

Political consensus

THE IMF's resident representative in Pakistan was right to put further emphasis on the importance of consensus for the implementation of the Fund programme. Her remarks, during a recent symposium in Islamabad, were generically phrased to imply all manner of consensus. But the fact that the Fund has specifically pointed out the ruling party's lack of majority in the

upper house as a significant source of risk to the passage of legislation required for successful implementation of the programme suggests that political consensus is at the heart of the matter. More broadly, the government needs to put in greater effort to build consensus among other categories of stakeholders as well, such as the business and trader community, which is not currently reconciled to playing its role in helping the government fulfil its commitment to an ambitious revenue target for the current fiscal year. Without this consensus, the programme faces significant challenges and its implementation will have a question mark hanging over it.

In the present environment, however, achieving consensus is easier said than done. The government is committed to the pursuit of objectives that currently are pulling it in opposite directions. The accountability drive under which leading figures from the opposition parties are being arrested is increasingly being cast as a political 'witch-hunt', and is souring relations between the government and opposition whose support will be needed when the time comes to ensure the passage of key legislation required under the programme. Any exercise in persuasion under these circumstances is bound to be complicated by the prevailing political situation. Where the business and trader community is concerned, it may be browbeaten into desisting from further disruptive activity such as strikes, or even from issuing hostile statements. But once the game shifts towards actually extracting the required revenues from their income streams, any use of coercive methods will be counterproductive. In time, the dust has to settle for business to resume, both in the economic and political sense of the word. It is the government's responsibility and obligation to bring that about. This is not just a moral responsibility but a need of the times. The political risk hanging over programme implementation needs to be taken more seriously because it can potentially negate all the other efforts being mounted by the government to see itself through the challenges that are about to start. A mature approach is needed at this time.

Hafiz Saeed's arrest

PRIME Minister Imran Khan's departure for the US has been preceded by a most timely development: the arrest of Hafiz Saeed, leader of the banned Jamaatud Dawa and a UN- and US-designated global terrorist.

The cleric was apprehended on Wednesday by Punjab's counterterrorism police while on his way from Lahore to Gujranwala to obtain bail in a terror-financing case.

There is a palpable sense that the government of late has moved its campaign against militant groups into high gear, with over two dozen cases of terror financing filed earlier this month against JuD's top leaders. The world is watching Pakistan's actions closely, particularly in connection with JuD and Jaish-e-Mohammed; any perceived kid-glove treatment of them will feed into global misgivings that the country has a selective policy vis-à-vis extremist organisations.

The latest turn of events has therefore gone down well, with President Donald Trump hailing the arrest of "the so-called Mumbai 'mastermind' after a ten-year-long search".

Pakistan must continue to plough ahead to put militant groups out of business and prosecute their members under the provisions of the Anti Terrorism Act. Otherwise, Hafiz Saeed's arrest could be perceived as little more than an opportunistic move calibrated to coincide with an important state visit.

Even more importantly, however, such a course correction has a critical bearing on Pakistan's internal security and its future as a responsible member of the international community.

The countrywide crackdown against militant groups a few months ago — in which provincial administrations in Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan sealed or took control of hundreds of madressahs, schools, mosques, etc run by these organisations — marked what appeared to be a definitive shift in the state's approach. Interior Minister retired Brig Ijaz Shah confirmed as much at a press conference on Thursday when he said the policy pertaining to suspected militant organisations had undergone a change, for which the PTI government deserved credit.

It is unfortunate that such a reversal did not come about some years earlier when fears were repeatedly expressed both in political circles and the media that appeasement of certain militant organisations carried inherent risks that would hurt Pakistan's long-term interests.

History has shown that such groups cannot be 'managed', nor their inherently violent proclivities turned on and off at will.

Moreover, all extremists at some level — even those that are not pan-Islamist — share an ideological affinity which leads them to enable each other, even if indirectly. Be that as it may, now that the state has resolved to eliminate them, it must close off every avenue that militant outfits use to survive and proliferate. They should not, for example, be able to circumvent a ban on their activities by emerging with new names, helmed by the same toxic individuals as before. Nor must they be mainstreamed into electoral politics unless they unequivocally renounce violence. Anything less will be a temporary reprieve.

Honouring Sana Mir

PAKISTAN women's cricket icon and its finest ambassador Sana Mir has been named one of three representatives for current players on the ICC women's committee this week. Sana, a former Pakistan captain and leading wicket-taker in women's ODIs, is joined by Australia's Lisa Sthalekar and Mithali Raj of India on the committee. Her inclusion is indeed a matter of great prestige for the country. An inspirational figure in Pakistan sports for more than a decade now, Sana has demonstrated grace and panache internationally, and her fine achievements in the sport have earned her many accolades since her debut in 2005. For someone who started playing cricket in the streets, Sana is well aware of the many challenges — far more than what male players have to undergo — that aspiring sportswomen in Pakistan are confronted with as they strive to make their mark. From enduring the neglectful official treatment meted out to women players, poor media coverage and sponsors' snubs, to having to break rigid societal boundaries and make do with scant facilities, she has weathered many a storm on her way up the ladder. It is for this reason that she is widely expected to bring greater insight and knowledge to the ICC committee, to the benefit of women's cricket. She has termed her inclusion in the committee as an

honour and a very courageous and inclusive step by the ICC that has involved current players in the promotion and development of the game. A quick look at the recent graph of the Pakistan women's cricket team shows a pragmatic approach as well as the players' faith in their own ability to do well; this sentiment was apparent in their series win over the West Indies and a drawn series against the formidable South Africa this year.

Apart from cricket, it is heartening to witness the determination and talent of other sportswomen, such as football captain Hajra Khan, athlete Naseem Hameed, swimming's golden girl Kiran Khan, tennis sensation Ushna Sohail, martial artist Kulsoom Hazara and others performing at the national and international level. Having said that, much more is needed to stir a revolution in women's sports. It is the responsibility of powerful sports bodies such as the PCB and other federations to ensure adequate facilities at the grass roots, dedicated playgrounds and coaches for women as well as regular events and tours for them to showcase their talent.

One giant leap

HUMANS first alighted on the moon's surface 50 years ago today — a culmination of human ingenuity and fortitude the likes of which had never before been witnessed. Besides the three astronauts aboard Apollo 11 who set sail to the moon, there were the leaders, policymakers and hundreds of thousands of scientists, engineers and technicians who strove for decades to realise this goal. The Cold War motivations driving the space race are well known, yet its historical context cannot diminish the event's symbolism as a collective human achievement of monumental proportions. The moon landing, even today, is a beacon by which we mortals measure both, our ceaseless, unrelenting capacity to explore and discover the mysteries of the universe, and our ability to be awed and humbled in the presence of overwhelming scientific evidence underscoring our miniscule, transient place in this vast expanse. The impact of the Apollo 11 mission's success continues to reverberate. From the Cassini and Juno space probes to Saturn and Jupiter, to the rovers on Mars, from the discovery of the Higgs boson, to the capturing of the first image of a black hole just months ago — none would have been possible had a failure of imagination been allowed to thwart these bold pursuits.

It is also a sobering reminder for a country such as Pakistan, in which admission to the school of hard knocks is seen as a rite of passage rather than a tragic consequence of a state that fails to invest in its human potential — particularly in STEM education and research. Recall the young man who, in April, was fined for flying in a small aeroplane he built himself. Mohammed Fayyaz had to quit school after matriculation to support his family by working menial jobs. Imagine the heights people like him could reach in a country that values creativity and innovation, and treats the curious mind as its most precious asset. To say ‘the sky is the limit’ would be an understatement.

Win for ex-Fata

THE first-ever provincial election in the areas comprising former Fata was a momentous occasion in the country’s history, paving the way for the long-awaited representation of tribal residents who want to see the upliftment of their conflict-ridden and underdeveloped region. According to initial results released by the ECP, independent candidates dominated the provincial assembly elections in the seven tribal districts of Fata by securing six out of the 16 general seats, while the ruling party grabbed five seats. In total, 285 candidates, including two women, contested the general seats of the KP Assembly to represent three constituencies each of Bajaur and Khyber districts; two each of Mohmand, Kurram, North Waziristan and South Waziristan; and one each of Orakzai district and ex-Frontier regions. Polling was held under heavy security arrangements, but the process was peaceful — a considerable achievement considering how vulnerable the tribal agencies have been to terrorist violence.

The results from the election underscore the unique dynamics of politics in Fata, where independent candidates have historically triumphed over political parties as the latter do not have strong roots in the tribal areas. It is also clear that candidates who had the resources to splurge on political campaigns won by comfortable margins as evidenced in Khyber district. In some constituencies, voters stamped the ballot according to their tribal links or affiliation with religious parties. Notable also was the victory of the PTM-linked candidate who won in North Waziristan — an area still reeling from the attack on the Kharqamar check-post. Two of the biggest political parties in the country — the PPP and PML-N — did not bag even a single seat,

underscoring the parties' disconnect with the voters. The overall turnout remained low, with 735,000 of the 2.8m registered voters going to the polls; women's representation stood at 28.6pc, despite the fact that it was a watershed moment for Fata. Evidently, there is work to be done to involve the residents of the tribal districts into the political process. The ECP had launched an impressive awareness campaign in the tribal districts in the run-up to the polls, but gaps still exist and the ECP must engage and motivate more voters before the next election. There was also the issue of campaign restrictions in North and South Waziristan, which was eventually lifted after the ECP intervened last week.

Despite the low turnout, the Fata election recorded the historic commitment of its residents towards the voting process. The searing heat, security fears, and the absence of the political fervour which grips a country during a general election did not keep away voters in constituencies such as Kurram-II, which saw a 40pc turnout. Though it may not have been a level playing field for some, it is still heartening that the general consensus amongst the candidates was that the election was free and fair — a rare sentiment in a country where politics are dramatically divisive.

Forex regulations

THE recent amendments to the Foreign Exchange Manual are causing some alarm among the exchange companies because they are being read to mean that the government is on a path to wind up the business of the latter and let banks have a free run of things in the open foreign currency markets. Specifically, amendments made to three chapters of the manual announced on July 20 allow banks to enter the business of buying and selling foreign currency to retail clients, that had been catered to exclusively by the exchange companies thus far. Even though the scope of the allowance given to the banks is restricted thus far, the apprehension has spread that in the days to come, the State Bank will open the doors completely to banks to conduct this business. On the face of it, the development sounds like a positive one for retail clients since it will expand the choices available to them to meet their foreign exchange needs. The apprehension of the exchange companies is justified only if the steps being taken by the State Bank to broaden participation in the kerb markets are

followed up by decertification of the exchange companies. But short of that, if the exchange company heads are only concerned about the expanded scope of competition that they will face, then their worries should be ignored.

For many years now, the State Bank has struggled to regulate the actions of the exchange companies. The spread between interbank and the kerb exchange rate cannot be allowed to expand too far, and there are apprehensions felt by the State Bank that the exchange companies abuse their dominant position in the market to withhold supply of foreign currency on certain occasions, and thus play a role in forcing a depreciation even when the fundamentals do not call for one. This has happened on a number of occasions in the recent past, prompting the State Bank to summon the heads of the exchange companies, who in turn present the argument that it is the banks that are creating a shortage in the market. Faced repeatedly with this situation, it is only natural to expect the bank to find a way to correct what may be a built-in flaw in the foreign currency markets. The State Bank should proceed with its reforms with the exclusive aim of putting the forex markets on a sound footing.

A bizarre case

AN ill-conceived, and frankly ridiculous, notification issued last week by the CAA was mercifully withdrawn late on Sunday night — but not before causing much pandemonium. No one seems to be owning up to being the brains behind the decision to make it mandatory for all passengers travelling out of Pakistani airports to have their check-in luggage wrapped in plastic for the bargain price of Rs50 per bag. The earlier notification attributed the decision to the federal government, which left many scratching their heads, wondering how the government could take such a step. These included some members of the cabinet and ruling party themselves, while others — including, incredulously, the minister of state for climate change — sought to justify the decidedly non-green initiative. Besides the terrible inconvenience caused to travellers being forced to stand in yet another queue to pay for the ignominy of participating in the environment's destruction, there was also the question of how the contract to wrap everyone's luggage was awarded. From confusion, to consternation, to occasional bouts of mirth as the mini saga unfolded over the weekend,

perhaps it would have been more fitting had the proclamation ordered that all our baggage henceforth be wrapped in red tape.

Ostensibly, what little logic can be made out in this decision might be linked to complaints by passengers that their luggage had been ransacked after being checked in, as well as a general attempt to ensure that no smuggling activity took place following the ANF, ASF and Customs screening process. But any issues of these kinds are a result of systemic failures, and not trivial matters that can be patched over with cling film. It is also deeply troubling that, despite long-overdue bans on plastic bags finally coming into effect in several of our cities, a move that would make the consumption of single-use plastic in this country burgeon overnight could still be considered. Clearly, not everyone is on the same page vis-à-vis tackling Pakistan's environmental emergency.

Domestic abuse

WHEN Fatema Sohail published a disturbing account of physical, mental and verbal abuse that she suffered allegedly at the hands of her husband, actor Mohsin Abbas Haider, it came as a shock to many. Yet her words were simply an echo of what millions of women suffer silently within their homes all over the world. Unlike in other countries, however, police cases are rarely registered against the abusers in Pakistan, due to the perpetuation of a culture of shame and silence. On her Facebook account, and then later at a press conference, Ms Sohail recounted several instances of cruelty and battery by her husband, where she was “dragged”, “kicked” and “punched” violently, including, shockingly, when she was three months' pregnant with their child. Given that women here are often not believed when they speak up about injustice and abuse, she displayed photographs of her bruises for the world to see as hard ‘evidence’ of the crime. Some within the show business industry also corroborated her account, while many vocalised their support for her as well as for other victims of domestic violence. It takes a great deal of courage and strength to come forth with such stories in our society, where matters like these are quickly hushed up and brushed under the carpet. Regrettably, suffering is normalised as part of the experience of being a ‘good woman’. Indeed, violence against women is also normalised in film and television. So amongst all the outpouring of support, there were the expected comments from the self-appointed upholders of ‘tradition’

telling her to not discuss ‘matters of the home’ in public — ill-begotten ‘advice’ that most Pakistani women have had to endure after suffering unforgiveable violence against their body and spirit — while others questioned her truthfulness and her account of events.

The fact is that those who abuse once will do it again — over and over again — and women from all social strata are vulnerable to it. Fatema Sohail is extremely brave to leave a situation that was dangerous for her and her child, and for taking a stand against the worst of patriarchy. Hopefully, her actions will encourage other women in a similar situation to do the same, to not blame themselves nor accept blame by others for the behaviour of men who should do better. It is time to speak up, and this is the right time to begin the conversation against domestic abuse.

Trade unions

ON the Balochistan High Court’s orders, the recent announcement to cancel the registration of 62 trade unions is yet another blow to workers’ right to vocalise, defend and organise for their interests. Largely impacting government workers, along with some from the private sector, there have so far been no reports of the verdict being challenged, despite it being a blatant violation of Article 17 of the Constitution (which provides for the right to association) and several ILO conventions that Pakistan is a signatory to. Only a small percentage of Pakistan’s large workforce is unionised, and a great deal of labour gets categorised as informal work. But it seems as if the workers of this country have become so accustomed to conceding their rights that barely a whimper is raised at their demise. Meanwhile, the people in the country’s most impoverished province continue to be marginalised and have their grievances silenced. This points to a worrying trend, indeed a global one, which can be witnessed in much of the (post-Reagan and post-Thatcher) world in varying degrees: the diminishing strength of labour unions and movements. In a world of great power imbalances, the biggest casualties are the working people. Many are hired on a contract basis, are paid poorly and face job insecurity. This will only worsen in these times of a poorly performing economy, rising inflation and layoffs in many industries.

Often, they have no choice but to put in long hours at work and are not provided any social benefits. In industrial professions and factories,

workplace hazards, accidents and fatalities on the job are all too common, and yet there is a dearth of proper health and safety mechanisms. Without the presence of strong unions, how will any of these issues be addressed? While the present government has rarely spoken about unions, legislators must take notice of the high court verdict. In worst-case scenarios, snuffing out lawful dissent will only give birth to unlawful means of registering protest.

Trump's Kashmir offer

THERE are numerous takeaways from Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent meeting with President Donald Trump in Washington. But perhaps the one that has grabbed the most attention is the US leader's offer to mediate between Pakistan and India to resolve the Kashmir imbroglio.

"If I can help, I would love to be a mediator," said Mr Trump while replying to a journalist's question at a joint press conference with the prime minister. And perhaps the more explosive part of his offer was that the US president told the media that it was in fact Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who broached the subject while meeting Mr Trump two weeks ago.

"He actually said would you like to be mediator or arbitrator?" said Mr Trump quoting the Indian leader.

The Indian reaction was predictable; New Delhi's external affairs ministry tweeted that "no such request has been made by PM", while reiterating the standard Indian line that all outstanding issues with Pakistan be dealt with bilaterally. Imran Khan's reaction was far more accepting, as the prime minister commented that the "prayers of over a billion people" of the subcontinent would be with the American leader should he help pave the way for peace in Kashmir.

Read: India denies Modi asked Trump to mediate Kashmir dispute

Donald Trump's foreign policy style is unpredictable, to say the least. While he has been reckless on some fronts (Iran), on others (North Korea) he has gone the extra mile to try and resolve a decades-old dispute. Though he may throw caution and the principles of international relations to the wind, and deal with global issues in a highly personal manner, Mr Trump's maverick tactics may just be what the Kashmir issue needs.

As for the veracity of his claims, only Mr Trump and Mr Modi can explain what the actual talking points of their conversation were. But from Pakistan's point of view, Mr Trump's idea of mediation is an excellent suggestion, because the bilateral approach till now has failed to bear fruit. While Islamabad and Delhi came tantalisingly close to a solution in 2001's Agra summit, there has been little hope thereafter on this front where bilateral dialogue is concerned.

At the end, it is Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris who will have to take the final decision to resolve this over seven-decade-old imbroglio. But a little friendly 'push' from powerful global actors may help the stakeholders reach a mutually acceptable solution. Moreover, Indian rigidity has left little hope on the bilateral front, especially under Mr Modi's watch, as Delhi keeps harping on about 'terrorism', without earnestly responding to Pakistan's offers for dialogue.

Whether it is the US, the UN, or other global players, clearly a multilateral framework may be able to provide a conducive atmosphere for the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Delhi may be posturing to look 'strong' domestically, but it must realise that meaningful dialogue is the only solution for Kashmir.

Trump on Afghanistan

THE American president is not known for his politically correct remarks, be it on pressing domestic issues or delicate matters of foreign affairs.

In his recent interaction with Prime Minister Imran Khan, Donald Trump spoke about the Afghan issue — a concern that largely shapes the Trump administration's views vis-à-vis Pakistan.

However, what Mr Trump said has raised a furore of sorts, with the Afghan government seeking clarification of his comments.

Perhaps meaning to indicate his lack of appetite for further foreign wars, the US president said while meeting Mr Khan that he could easily win the Afghan conflict but did not "want to kill 10m people", while adding that the US could wipe Afghanistan "off the face of the earth".

Whatever Mr Trump meant to say, his comments have come across as arrogant and insensitive; oddly, the presidential bluster comes as the US peace envoy is headed to Kabul for talks with the Afghan Taliban.

Unfortunately, the US has been unable to extricate itself from Afghanistan for nearly two decades.

What started off as a mission to punish those supposedly involved in the Sept 11 terror attacks has transformed into an open-ended war; moreover, the Americans have also attempted nation-building in Afghanistan, trying to transplant a Western model of democracy in a tribal society already reeling from instability and war since the 1970s.

However, these attempts have failed to bear fruit, as the nation remains divided along ethno-linguistic lines, while the Taliban are said to control nearly half of the country.

The fact is that the US must acknowledge that its 'shock-and-awe' tactics in the country, and its attempts to engineer a political and social structure, have utterly failed.

Instead of making misguided comments about obliterating Afghanistan and killing millions of people, the American president needs to highlight a doable exit strategy.

Moreover, the American establishment must admit that its cavalier attempts at nation-building in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya were wrong and that its efforts have left these nations worse off.

However, Mr Trump was right when he said Pakistan could help the US exit Afghanistan.

Indeed, this country has played and should continue to play a role in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

Moreover, instability in the latter has been one of the major factors behind the sociopolitical upheaval in Pakistan, especially in the wake of the Soviet invasion.

Yet while Pakistan, the US, and all neighbours of Afghanistan have key roles to play where facilitating peace between Kabul and the Taliban is concerned, the process needs to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

The shuttle diplomacy between Kabul, Doha and other cities is continuing to persuade the Taliban to sign a peace deal.

Terror iagan

SEPARATE terror attacks in Dera Ismail Khan and Quetta on Sunday and Tuesday serve as a grisly reminder that the scourge of terrorism and militant violence still plague the country. In D.I. Khan, seven people, including four policemen, died in two attacks — on a police check post and a government-run hospital that was targeted by a suicide bomber. Some reports indicated that the bomber might have been a woman who waited outside the trauma centre of the hospital for the victims of the gun attack on the check-post to be brought to the ward before detonating the explosives. The banned TTP Khorasani group claimed responsibility for the two attacks. In Quetta, terrorists planted an explosive device on a bicycle and detonated it outside a medical store, killing four people. The Quetta attack comes nearly a month after security forces foiled a terror attack in the Loralai area, where three suicide bombers were killed.

The attacks underscore the reality that more needs to be done before we can claim that Pakistan has seen the end of terrorism. Undoubtedly, consecutive security operations in the country have vastly limited the capacity of terror groups to strike. But despite the gains made by these military advances, it is evident that there is a need for continued vigilance, along with sustained focus on eliminating/ addressing the causes of militancy. For instance, beyond proscribing militant organisations, there is an urgent need to implement the ban on the activities of these groups and their members in letter and spirit. In the past, the state had a peculiar predilection for promoting the concept of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ militants — a dangerous narrative that discounted the material and logistical links between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jihadis. Although it appears that there is a reckoning of sorts under the incumbent government that says it wants to change the policy on suspected militant groups, it is essential for this introspection to go beyond bans and blacklisting, as ineffective implementation of the new thinking can

prove to be counterproductive in the long run. It is also important for the government to identify and block the source of funding of terror groups, many of whom are reportedly financed through drug trafficking, smuggling, extortion, kidnapping and street crimes. Law-enforcement agencies must continue to stay vigilant and be proactive in dismantling terror groups with the support of the government, whose focus should be on addressing the question of why young people become victims of radicalisation

But the process is slow and painstaking, which is why foreign players must be careful about the comments they make, and not risk inflaming the situation with loose talk.

Childhood stunting

IN his inaugural address to the nation, Prime Minister Imran Khan spoke about Pakistan's appalling rates of stunting, apparently the third highest in the world. Stunting is a lifelong impairment which cannot be reversed; it increases the risk of contracting non-infectious chronic diseases in children. During that speech, Mr Khan held out X-ray scans of the brain of a stunted child next to that of a healthy one, showing the visible difference in size between the two. The contrasting images underscored that stunting is not only a physical impairment, it is an intellectual one as well, with grave consequences for the nation's future. There are several reasons for the prevalence of stunting in our region, and all are linked to the high rates of poverty, the lack of access to proper healthcare and poor hygiene practices in the general population, and the secondary status of women in society. Stunting is caused when children do not have access to a nutritious diet in the first two years of life; when mothers are malnourished before and during pregnancy; when proper sanitary precautions are not practised within the household; and because of inadequate psychosocial stimulation. While it was encouraging then to see the prime minister put a large-scale but largely ignored health concern at the top of his agenda when he came into power, it seems to have since fallen out of the list of priorities.

Now, the government and Unicef have come out with the National Nutrition Survey 2018, which sheds some light on the topic. According to the report, the highest rates of stunting occur in KP (merged with tribal areas), with 48.3pc of children under the age of five suffering from the condition. Second

worst were Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan (46.6pc each), followed by Sindh (45.5pc). In Azad Kashmir and Punjab, the rate of stunting stood at 39.3pc and 36.4pc respectively. Meanwhile, Islamabad had the lowest at 32.6pc. Sadly, even at its lowest, the figure is far too high.

A ‘free’ media

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan during his visit to the US made certain assertions about press freedom in Pakistan that are difficult to square with the facts.

During his joint press conference with President Donald Trump, Mr Khan declared: “To say there are curbs on Pakistani press is a joke.”

Later, in an interview with a US think tank, he went so far as to say that the media in Pakistan is freer than that in Britain, adding “it is not just free but it is out of control”.

On Wednesday, however, even before Mr Khan arrived back home, it was revealed in Karachi that the government is planning to set up media courts, ostensibly to resolve journalists’ grievances.

A look at how the ‘free’ media in Pakistan has fared within the space of this month alone highlights the gulf between the government’s words and its actions.

Former president Asif Zardari’s interview was pulled a few minutes into transmission; 21 TV channels were sent show-cause notices for airing Maryam Nawaz’s live press conference; three channels were taken off air without assigning any reason; another channel, a few hours before the prime minister arrived in the US, was either forced off the air or had its channel number changed in many parts of the country.

These are but the most egregious examples of what has become a massive exercise in micromanaging day-to-day news coverage.

The unrelenting assault on editorial independence includes orders — sometimes in the guise of ‘advice’ — to give a particular spin to news reports, drop certain stories and even omit specific quotes by elected individuals.

Granted, all censorship does not emanate from official quarters.

In many instances, journalists themselves ‘sanitise’ their work, but that only goes to show how well the tactics of media repression are working.

In such a situation, where the journalist community’s first and foremost grievance is a lack of freedom, media courts signify a step towards institutionalised government regulation — official censorship — so that the state’s stranglehold on the media will be complete.

No democracy can thrive without a free press, and a government secure in its mandate to rule, must be open to fair comment.

Certainly there are instances where the media has been cavalier with the facts and intemperate in tone, but there are legal remedies to counter libellous allegations, such as the defamation law.

In its defence though, the Pakistani media does maintain a modicum of respect towards political leaders.

Compare that with the British press — less free than ours, according to Mr Khan — which has used epithets like ‘clown’ to describe the UK’s newly elected prime minister.

In any case, all political parties have been at the receiving end of the Pakistani media’s shortcomings, not the PTI alone.

In fact, for the wall-to-wall coverage of its 2014 dharna, the PTI has much to thank the far freer press of the time.

Property rates

FOR far too long, the country’s property market has served as a major avenue for many to park and launder their illegal money in, as well as avoid payment of taxes. Successive governments have kept away from regulating and reforming the market in the past, primarily out of fear of stiff resistance from, and loss of political support of, what many now term as the ‘property mafia’. The previous government’s tentative attempts towards the end of its term to close the massive gap between the official valuation rate and the actual market value of a property for the purpose of regulating the sector fell

flat. The government twice postponed the hike because of opposition from the beneficiaries of the status quo in this sector ahead of the 2018 general elections in the country. Luckily, the incumbent administration has shown a stronger determination on the issue as reflected in the second upward revision of property valuation rates in an attempt to bring them closer to the actual market prices in 20 major cities across Pakistan in less than six months.

The fresh increase in property valuation rates, which are now estimated to be around 80pc to 85pc of the market price, will help the government collect significantly higher tax revenues and deepen the documentation of the economy. Coupled with some other initiatives announced in the budget for the present fiscal year, such as the increase in the holding period of a property for recovering tax on capital gain, the alignment of official valuation rates with market prices is expected to generate additional tax revenues of Rs40bn. These measures are also expected to discourage speculative investment in immovable property, divert capital into productive sectors, plug the loopholes used for whitening illegal money, and slow down the rapid increase in property prices. In certain areas of different cities, as realtors have pointed out, the new property valuation rates are higher than the actual, fair market prices. If so, it is incumbent upon the FBR to carry out a detailed survey of the property markets in different cities to assess the actual market prices and revise upwards or down the rates to remove the discrepancies. Such surveys, in fact, should be organised on an annual basis to collect the relevant data and prevent the gap between property valuation rates and the actual market rates from escalating.

Unethical tourism

IT is not surprising to see local tourism in the country's northern areas picking up again. To behold sights of towering, snow-capped mountains and gushing, pristine lakes; to pass through ancient history and be greeted by a warm and hospitable people — these are just some of the reasons why tourists have been flocking to locations in the districts of Gilgit-Baltistan, KP, and Azad Kashmir. But all of this may change in the near future with the influx of irresponsible visitors, who do not seem to respect the sanctity of the places they temporarily pass through. In a relatively short span of time, these

once-immaculate places now present a sorry scene of garbage scattered around, single-use plastic being the worst culprit. On social media, photos that are being shared of littering in places such as the Khunjerab Pass simply highlight one of the discontents of an expanding tourism industry. But the issue here is not of a 'lack of education' or poor access to proper disposal sites — as many often incorrectly assume — but a shortsighted lack of concern for others. If tourists who come from the big cities and have money to spend cannot see the error of their ways, there is no other option but to introduce penalties. After all, it is unlikely that these same people would litter when travelling to other countries, where there is better civic sense.

Recently, the Galliyat Development Authority fined tourists and several government-owned rest houses for dumping garbage out in the open, after having issued a warning last month. And in April, Hunza became one of the first districts to outlaw single-use plastic bags — with some measure of success as anecdotal evidence suggests. Alongside its tourism-related ambitions, the government must promote ethical, socially responsible travelling. Many of these places are still at the periphery. Undoubtedly, resentment towards outsiders who do not respect the land or its people will grow. In fact, it is already on the rise. And for that, all blame cannot be placed on the government.

No end to stand-off

PERHAPS there could not have been a more apt finale to the first anniversary of the 2018 general election, which brought the PTI to power, than the show put up by the opposition on Thursday. True to form, opposition politicians raised angry slogans in major cities; along with voicing their other grievances, they once again alleged that the polls last year had been grossly rigged. Not to be left behind, the government followed its usual pattern of vociferously criticising the other side, instead of demonstrating that it had far more serious and meaningful chores to attend to. It seems as if the business of running the country can wait when new contenders win power and spend several months consolidating their position. Quite obviously, such a process requires the government to target a collection of old faces brought together, in this case, by its clean-up operation, threatening the rivals' existence with as much noise as can be made. In fact, one could be forgiven for wondering

if there is a conspiracy afoot to keep politicians from addressing everyday issues — with implications for the lives and lifestyles of Pakistanis. In this way, the current assembly is different from the legislatures preceding it: the current house has wasted far more time participating in petty opposition-government squabbles than ushering in positive change.

Usually, most of the blame for slow proceedings in an elected house must be borne by the government. This is also true in the current instance. But what should one say of the opposition parties that are, by and large, not even pretending to take up many important issues? For example, whereas the election anniversary speeches by opposition leaders at the public meetings sought to cast a cloud over the last general poll, the issue of the alleged rigging was hardly debated during the course of the year with the seriousness it deserved. With an opposition that complained more than made a determined effort to have its grievances addressed, the government felt there was no need to go beyond the ritual of agreeing to form committees to investigate the objections.

Moreover, the opposition should have realised that its overall poor performance on issues that matter gave the ruling party a free hand to take forward its favourite campaign of painting its political rivals as a set of thieves. Or maybe it was the force with which the Zardaris, the Sharifs and others were pursued by the accountability machinery that compelled the opposition parties to concentrate, often obsessively, on defending their leaders and tailoring their actions and statements accordingly. The government may call this a success of its strategy but it has missed the broader picture. Ultimately, it is the people who have to pay the price of political stand-offs and sluggish proceedings in the house. But no one wants to listen to them.

OBL raid questions

EIGHT years after the event, mystery continues to shroud the military raid carried out by American forces in Abbottabad in which Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden was taken out. During his recent visit to the US, Prime Minister Imran Khan told Fox News that it was the ISI that supplied information about the Al Qaeda leader's whereabouts to the Americans. When queried about Mr Khan's comments, the Foreign Office's

spokesperson on Thursday affirmed that the ISI gave the CIA crucial information, but parried a question about whether Pakistani intelligence operatives participated in the raid. The fact is that ever since the operation was carried out, the official version has been changing; the state had initially acknowledged that Pakistan was in the know, but later appeared to backtrack. Because of the veil of secrecy over this matter, the truth has failed to emerge, which is why clarity is needed from the government about what exactly happened in the Abbottabad compound early that May morning.

To dispel the confusion, the state needs to release the Abbottabad Commission report. Unfortunately, whenever it comes to matters of national importance, the trend in Pakistan has been for the state to drag its feet, form a commission, and then forget about the matter. In the aftermath of major national crises, this is the pattern that has been followed. For example, the state was forced to publish the Hamoodur Rehman Commission report — on the East Pakistan debacle — only after it was published in an Indian paper. In this age of right-to-information laws, leaks and whistleblowers, it is very difficult to keep the lid on unpleasant events. The fact is that when the state is silent on such issues, it gives rise to speculation, and worse, conspiracy theories. While redactions can be made to cover matters that the state considers essential to national security, the Abbottabad Commission report and other similar documents need to be made public to dispel rumours and establish the facts. Once the verified details of such matters are in the public domain, they can be discussed at various forums so that lessons can be learnt and similar mistakes avoided. Moreover, negative propaganda from hostile actors can also be countered when the state acknowledges the facts of any sensitive incident. Officialdom needs to shed its hidebound thinking and commit itself to transparency and accountability in order to move forward.

Beyond skin-deep

MINISTER of State for Climate Change Zartaj Gul has announced a crackdown on fairness creams that contain more than 1pc mercury — a melanin-inhibiting substance that is commonly found in skin-whitening creams and soaps. Mercury is known to damage the skin and kidneys of consumers, along with affecting their psychological state. It is also

detrimental to the environment, and when discharged as wastewater, it finds its way into the human food chain. Several African and EU countries have thus banned the distribution of products that contain mercury. In Pakistan, out of the 59 creams that were recently tested — both locally and internationally produced, and all easily available in the market — 56 contained excess mercury and were deemed toxic for consumers. Another harmful ingredient that is often found in skin-lightening products is hydroquinone, a bleaching agent. That skin-bleaching and whitening creams damage the health of consumers is an open secret. And yet it continues to be a multibillion-dollar industry worldwide, with Asia being its biggest market, followed by Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. Skin-lightening products are also used by diaspora populations in North America and Europe.

But beyond health implications, there is a larger, deep-rooted issue here that needs to be addressed, which has to do with societal attitudes towards colour in a postcolonial world. Self-loathing and inferiority are inherited down the generations. If one glances through advertisements, the message is clear: white or light skin is to be associated with beauty, wealth, power and prestige; while dark skin is ugly, undesirable, and something that needs to be 'erased'. This is endorsed by celebrities and mindlessly accepted by society; people rarely think twice before passing flippant and derisive comments on television screens and within households. These products both prey on and perpetuate insecurity in the population. But why should that insecurity exist in the first place, and who does it benefit? Certainly not the people using them. It is time to dismantle this beauty myth.

Lawmakers' nationality

DUAL nationality can be a tricky issue when it comes to the right to stand for election, inevitably bringing up questions of divided loyalties and conflict of interest.

Perhaps buoyed by US-based Pakistanis' enthusiastic reception of Prime Minister Imran Khan during his trip to America, the government has decided to extend dual nationals the right to contest elections in this country. The cabinet has set up a high-powered committee to chalk out a roadmap for the purpose. To translate the proposal into reality, a constitutional amendment

will be needed: Article 63 (1)(c) holds that a person acquiring the citizenship of a foreign state is ineligible for election to parliament.

A comprehensive debate is also in order. This is an emotive issue due to historical and cultural contexts peculiar to Pakistan, and its pros and cons must be carefully weighed by parliament.

The prime minister has often expressed his faith in overseas Pakistanis' capacity to contribute to the country's progress, specifically its economy. In recent years, the issue of dual nationals in public office has cropped up several times, with public and legal opinions tending towards a narrow — some would say too narrow — interpretation of the above-cited constitutional bar.

In December last year, for instance, the Supreme Court ordered the federal and provincial governments to set a deadline for bureaucrats with dual nationalities to either give up their foreign citizenship or lose their jobs. The apex court held that such individuals employed in the service of Pakistan are a threat to the country's interests. Such an outlook can be criticised as erring too greatly on the side of caution.

the opposing point of view holds that most overseas Pakistanis retain strong ties with their country of origin and should be given the chance to participate fully in its political process. One could also posit that, sad to say, among these immigrants are many of our best and brightest, and were they legally allowed to stand for election, they could add to the quality of representation of the Pakistani people. Nevertheless, if the PTI government's proposal does materialise, perhaps an exception could be made in the case of cabinet ministers who are bound by an oath of secrecy.

On overseas Pakistanis being able to exercise their right of franchise, however, there is across-the-board consensus and a legal provision in the Elections Act, 2017. The hurdle lies in devising a system that ensures efficacy, security and secrecy. Although the e-voting pilot project undertaken by the ECP under pressure from the Supreme Court in by-elections last year went smoothly, the response was extremely tepid. Of the overseas Pakistanis eligible to vote in the constituencies where the by-polls were being held, only a little over 1pc registered to cast their ballot. And from

among these, on polling day itself, 15pc did not exercise their right of franchise.

Syria deaths

A GRIM reminder that the war in Syria is still continuing has come in the form of a UN statement that air strikes by the Syrian state and its foreign allies have killed more than 100 civilians in the past 10 days. While violence is down from the levels of 2014 and 2015, hostilities between Bashar al-Assad's government and an assortment of rebel groups have not stopped. The aforementioned figures cited by UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet refer to Idlib and other areas in the north of Syria where opponents of the Damascus regime continue to hold out against the state. "These are civilian objects, and it seems highly unlikely ... that they are all being hit by accident," said the UN official while condemning the attacks. Syria and Russia, Mr Assad's primary foreign backer, have denied hitting civilians and claim they are fighting jihadi militants in the areas concerned.

Whatever justification Damascus may offer, the deaths of such a large number of non-combatants is unacceptable, and the Syrian government must explain why so many civilians have been targeted. Since the start of the conflict in 2011, both the Syrian regime and its jihadi opponents have indulged in atrocities. In fact, at one point terrorist groups including the self-styled Islamic State group and Al Nusra were dominating the fight against the regime, eclipsing the moderate opposition. However, as the Syrian government — with the help of its Russian and Iranian backers — has gained the upper hand and reclaimed territory, only a few areas, such as Idlib and its surroundings, remain in rebel control. While other Middle East crises, such as the US stand-off with Iran and the brutal Yemen war, may have been grabbing world headlines, the Syrian conflict cannot be forgotten. The aim for all inside Syria as well as regional countries and world powers should be a negotiated settlement to the conflict, and a workable plan for a representative government in Damascus. The militant groups are on the back foot, therefore the Assad regime must open up communication channels and come to terms with the moderate opposition; external players need to facilitate this process, rather than inflaming matters inside Syria. In the immediate term, all hostilities targeting civilians should end, and

humanitarian activities must be allowed to resume unimpeded if the goal is to rehabilitate the Syrian people. Instead of pursuing the path of violence, Damascus should agree to reconciliation and dialogue.

Tax refunds

THE new sales tax rules being implemented from next month to address the accumulation of tax refund claims of exporters, amid withdrawal of the 'no tax no refund' facility on their inputs under the zero-rating regime, are expected to somewhat ease pressure on their cash flows. It would also cut exporters' costs on stocking raw materials. The new mechanism will ensure processing and payment of refunds on the basis of consumption through an automated system in 72 hours of filing of monthly returns, along with the declaration of stocks. The facility is, however, meant only for manufacturers-cum-exporters; commercial exporters will get their refunds after realisation of export proceeds. If implemented in letter and spirit, this decision will prove a step forward in the direction of easing liquidity pressures that exporters are facing amid the withdrawal of the 'no tax no refund' regime in the current budget to meet the conditions for the IMF's Extended Fund Facility.

There is little likelihood of the government accepting the exporters' demand for payment of refunds immediately after purchase of their raw materials, instead of consumption of their stocks as is the practice in many other countries. But we expect the authorities to devise a formula for quicker and hassle-free payment of other outstanding refunds of Rs155bn. These have been stuck for a few years on account of income tax and provincial sales tax refunds, duty drawback of taxes, textile policy incentive packages, etc to help exporters resolve their liquidity issues. Going forward, the government would be well advised to put in place a mechanism for early reimbursement of these payments as well. Additionally, the authorities need to address issues such as timely payment of subsidies on energy supplies for export-oriented industries, removal of anti-dumping duties on the import of certain raw material for re-export, etc. A rapid increase in exports is crucial for sustainable economic growth. Unless policymakers realise this, Pakistan will continue to depend on foreign loans and periodically return to the IMF for financial bailouts.

The threat is not over

TWO separate attacks in different parts of the country, in which a total of 10 troops were martyred, have once again highlighted the militant threat that Pakistan has not yet been able to vanquish. Moreover, the attacks have underscored the need for the state to deal with militant actors of different ideologies and strategies in a comprehensive manner that eliminates the threat, and pacifies the regions concerned. On Friday, four Frontier Corps personnel were martyred in Balochistan's Kech district while in Saturday's attack, six soldiers were martyred in the newly created North Waziristan district of KP.

No group has claimed responsibility for the Kech attack, though the area has witnessed a long-running separatist insurgency by Baloch militants. The insurgency has indeed been going through a relatively slow phase, but the recent attack — if investigations do lead to separatist groups — would clearly show that Baloch militants still pose a threat to the security and stability of the state. Commenting on the attack, the military has said that it is likely the handiwork of “inimical forces ... attempting to destabilise Balochistan”. As for the incident in North Waziristan, the banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the attack which was apparently launched from across the border in Afghanistan. Where the erstwhile Fata districts are concerned, military operations have managed to bring a sense of order to the region, and the recent elections in the districts indicate the rulers' efforts to bring the area into the national mainstream. However, it would be wrong to assume that all is well in the sensitive region, as the attack targeting troops shows that parts of the newly merged tribal districts are still vulnerable to militant violence.

Indeed, in nature the insurgencies in Balochistan and the former Fata region are very different from each other; the former is being carried out by hard-line separatist forces, while the latter is being steered by dangerous religious extremists. However, what both insurgencies have in common is that they pose a threat to national security; both are also connected to Afghanistan. Pakistan has long said that the TTP and Baloch insurgents have found refuge and support in Afghanistan. The latest attacks only strengthen this perception. The state must take up these issues with Kabul and Washington — which pretty much runs Afghanistan's security infrastructure — and firmly

assert that any support for anti-Pakistan actors is unacceptable. Moreover, if the US wants Pakistan's help in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the table to end the war in Afghanistan, it must assure Pakistan that its western neighbour will not be used to harbour militants and terrorists working to destabilise this country. Internally, security must be strengthened to neutralise the threat, while the underlying issues that have helped propel insurgencies in Balochistan and the former Fata belt should be addressed with sagacity and a sense of justice.

Bias in education

A REPORT prepared by two NGOs reconfirms the worst fears of how the system is played against Pakistan's religious minorities at all levels and in all areas. The report by the Institute of Development Research and Corresponding Capabilities and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan focuses on education. The findings reflect the country's depressing record on the treatment of its minorities, indicating the great distance between us and other nations that can justifiably claim to be civilised. The survey sketches an embarrassing picture of the deeply ingrained intolerance in the most basic unit — the classroom. The report describes how non-Muslims are seen as “enemies of Islam by Muslim students and teachers”. Some 60pc of the non-Muslim students interviewed for this study had “experienced discrimination or felt they were being discriminated against and disrespected”. With such foundations, it is no surprise that the survey found that some 70pc of (non-Muslim) teachers had been discriminated against on the basis of their faith, with parents experiencing a similar faith-based bias. Given that there is great reluctance among those routinely discriminated against for their religious beliefs to come forward, the actual figures are probably much higher. That means that ‘only’ 60 out of 100 students, or 70 out of 100 parents alleging they were victims of the long-cultivated intolerance in the country could, ironically, be seen as a positive. The truth is, there are very few non-Muslims who escape discrimination at the hands of those who belong to the majority faith — so ingrained is prejudice in society.

Ways have been constantly suggested on how to tackle the issue, and there have been some efforts to deal with the discrimination that plagues

education in the country. However, the task at the outset has been complicated, as even innocuous terminology such as 'secular' can lead to trouble. Consequently, the work aimed at combating faith-based intolerance in all spheres has to be very subtle, but without losing sight of the main purpose. The difficulties along the way must never be an excuse for slackening or refusing to challenge existing societal attitudes that threaten to further divide a country in desperate need of basic lessons in pluralism. There are individuals who have taken a stand and those who must step forward to set an example. But it is the state that must lead the way carefully. If it fails to do its duty by all its citizens it will only sharpen societal divisions.

Amir's retirement

ACE fast bowler Mohammad Amir's abrupt decision to quit Test cricket with immediate effect has come as a shock to his fans besides leaving former players disappointed. The left-arm pacer, who turned 27 this year, has expressed his desire to concentrate on limited-over games and will be available for the ODIs as well as the T20 games for Pakistan, Though earlier this year, Amir had hinted at his plans of giving up the five-day format, he was persuaded by the PCB to play Tests as he was seen as a prime fast bowling hope in the absence of a spearhead. It was hoped that Amir, who in a landmark decision was brought back to mainstream cricket by the PCB after serving his five-year ban for involvement in the infamous spot-fixing scam in 2010, would serve the country in Test matches for a few more years. Alas, it was not to be. By quitting Test cricket at this stage of his career, Amir in effect has embarked on the path chosen by several modern-day cricketers who have opted for white ball cricket mainly due to the money involved.

Leading players such as Lasith Malinga of Sri Lanka, Chris Gayle of the West Indies and many others have been lured by cash-rich T20 leagues which have mushroomed around the world in recent years. According to estimates, a few weeks of appearances in the T20 leagues can fetch these players more than what they make in the entire year. There is, of course, less fatigue involved in limited-over matches compared to Tests and Amir has shown his keenness to be in good physical shape for next year's T20 World Cup in Australia. It for the ICC to address the broader issue and perhaps bind the top players to devote a large part of their careers to the

Test format, which is considered 'real' cricket and is the most authentic form of the game that has been properly chronicled in the record books

HIV/AIDS in Pakistan

A NEW report by UNAIDS has some upsetting insights on Pakistan, which has been placed on a list of 11 countries with the highest prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS. While in other countries, HIV/AIDS cases are on the decline, there has been a worrying upsurge of the disease in Pakistan. According to the report, the number of HIV/AIDS patients in the country rose to over 160,000 in 2018. Of these, around 110,000 were men; 48,000 women; and 5,500 children under the age of 15. Approximately 6,400 died from the disease. A decade ago, in 2008, the number of patients living with HIV/AIDS in the country stood at 4,300, showing a considerable increase. Undoubtedly, the number of patients would have risen even higher in 2019, in light of the sudden outbreak of the disease in Larkana in the past few months, particularly amongst children, some under the age of two.

For years, health researchers have been warning of the potential threat of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country, but an ostrich-like attitude and inability to talk about things as they are has resulted in the issue aggravating over the years. Because HIV/AIDS is still associated with what is condemned as socially deviant sexual activity, stigma surrounds the topic in our largely conservative society. HIV/AIDS was understood to be more prevalent amongst marginalised communities without access to treatment, such as the transgender population, drug addicts and commercial sex workers, but there is reason to believe it is increasingly spilling into the general population. In Larkana, for instance, the spread of the disease was traced to a single doctor — according to some residents, the only one in the area, though he has denied any deliberate involvement — reusing infected syringes on patients.

The cases in Larkana bring back memories of a small village in Sargodha in January 2018 when blood screening found 669 residents infected with the virus. It was largely blamed on a thriving quackery racket, where unsterilised equipment and infected syringes were used on an unsuspecting population, many of them women and children. In later interviews with HIV/AIDS patients in Sargodha, few were aware of how the disease was spread and what implications it had for their health. Even more recently, a news story

that failed to garner as much attention as Larkana stated that there were around 2,800 patients registered with the Punjab AIDS Control Programme for free vaccination, hailing from five districts in the province. Most were unaware they had the disease until they underwent screenings while donating blood, travelling abroad or undergoing surgery. In a culture of shame and silence, and in the absence of a nationwide HIV/AIDS awareness programme, few know the facts about their illness or how to ask for help until it is too late.

Stateless Rohingya

AMIDST heightened security, a high-profile delegation from Myanmar recently visited refugee camps in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar. Following growing international pressure on Myanmar's leadership over its treatment of the Rohingya Muslim population, the subsequent refugee crisis the most recent crackdown created, and the inability to ensure a safe climate for return, the delegation's mission was to again try and convince the Rohingya to go back. Approximately 700,000 Rohingya escaped from the extreme violence unleashed on them by the authorities in Myanmar between August 2016 and December 2017, as they settled in squalid refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh. Another 16,000 entered the country in 2018. Currently, there are over one million Rohingya refugees inside Bangladesh, which is struggling to accommodate them and has voiced its concerns several times at international forums. However, it has also said that it will not force the Rohingya to go back against their will. Nearly two years ago, the two countries signed a repatriation agreement. And yet, not a single Rohingya has expressed any willingness to return to his or her homeland. It is not hard to see why the community is afraid. While the Rohingya may have been born in Myanmar, the country can hardly be described as home. Human rights groups have described the internment camps in Rakhine state, where around 400,000 Rohingya continue to live, as an 'open-air prison'. Their movement is heavily restricted, but their plight is not new. Since the 1970s, the Rohingya were collectively and cruelly deprived of their citizenship status by Myanmar. Since then, they have effectively been rendered stateless, the root cause of their plight.

The Rohingya are not even listed in Myanmar's 135 official ethnic groups, and are instead referred to as 'Bengali', highlighting their outsider status. Given the label of the 'world's most persecuted minority', they have no rights to speak of and no place to call home. Rohingya community elders have made it clear that they will not return to Myanmar until their security and dignity can be ensured. However, until they are granted citizenship, it is unlikely that their dignity will ever be upheld. While putting greater pressure on the civil and military authorities in Myanmar to stop their persecution of the Rohingya, the international community must also give material assistance to Bangladesh, which has almost single-handedly taken on the mammoth responsibility of handling a human crisis it had no part in creating.

Tennis and peace

TRYING to introduce a semblance of normality in the Pakistan-India relationship must rank among the most patient endeavours ever attempted. Ant-like, a pattern towards at least a working relationship is attempted — until someone pulls out a piece from somewhere and it all comes crashing down. Bridge-makers then reappear to resume their task. This is how it has been for many decades. And now, once again an opportunity to improve relations has appeared in the form of the Pakistan-India Davis Cup games due in Pakistan a few weeks from now in September. It has been more than half a century since India last sent its players over to Pakistan for a Davis Cup tie — even though an official on that side of the border is now quoted as saying that, because it was an international tournament, no permission was needed from the government in New Delhi for the Indian players to undertake the tour, and that all that was required was an invitation from Pakistan. It is a remarkable statement, and an almost casual one in the context of moving forward on sporting ties between the two estranged, often skirmishing neighbours.

Realistically speaking, no one expects the two countries to compromise on their respective positions for the sake of a few languid sets of lawn tennis. But the sport does underscore the existence of a variety of methods to help hostile countries engage with one another in an environment that is otherwise fraught with divisions. The prospect of the Indian tennis players taking on local talent creates hope not just for sporting events between the

two countries, but for the return of international sports in Pakistan in a big way. Between now and the scheduled Davis Cup ties, we are likely to see all kinds of attempts being made to stop the event. The real test for the Pakistan-India peace train lies in its sustained response to attacks from those who oppose better ties. Will it move on or derail?

Cracking down on terror financing

THE tactics employed by the state to neutralise the capacity of Pakistan-based militant groups to wreak mayhem are becoming more finely tuned and comprehensive.

It has emerged that the FBR has established a Financial Action Task Force cell to ensure that terrorism-related financial flows through currency smuggling are disrupted and regulations to prevent the practice correctly applied.

The cell will serve as the focal point for activities related to customs' compliance with the FATF regulations, on which depends Pakistan's removal from the FATF grey list.

The development follows on the heels of the July 17 arrest of Jamaatud Dawa chief, Hafiz Saeed, in connection with a terror-financing case.

He was one of 13 top JuD leaders booked some days earlier by CTD Punjab in several money-laundering and terror-financing cases.

According to the law-enforcement agency, JuD was receiving huge amounts of funds from around 10 non-profits and trusts that were banned in April.

Militancy in Pakistan has long exploited public sentiments to ensure a steady stream of financing, which extremist groups then put to use within the country or send abroad — often through opaque 'hawala' transactions.

That this ploy has worked so well, in fact has become an albatross around our neck, speaks to society's rightward drift. While some faith-based charity organisations may be indeed engaged in welfare activities, albeit with a religio-political agenda, others have sinister objectives. Many jihadi groups such as JuD and Jaish-e-Mohammad — the main targets of the recent countrywide crackdown against militant outfits — have welfare wings to raise

funds, help expand their support base and multiply their financial resources. The guise of charity is particularly expedient when the parent organisations are banned.

After the inconsistent, somewhat floundering attempts in previous years to tackle militancy, the government seems to have arrived at a well-thought-out and integrated strategy.

In March, provincial administrations in Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan sealed or took control of hundreds of madressahs, schools, mosques, etc run by these groups.

Concurrently, along with the strike against jihadi infrastructure, the state is putting its weight behind choking off all supply lines for terror financing and closing the loopholes that resourceful militants can take advantage of.

An important corollary to the FATF cell's work is effective investigation and prosecution of those found guilty of funding terrorism.

Nacta has conducted some capacity-building workshops for relevant personnel from federal and provincial law-enforcement authorities; hopefully, more such training is on the anvil.

According to Prime Minister Imran Khan while on his recent visit to the US, there remain thousands of militants in Pakistan who continue to pose a threat to the country.

Certainly, the magnitude of the challenge cannot be understated.

History has time and again illustrated the tenacity of violent extremists and their ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

The state must stay several steps ahead of them.

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Karachi rain

It is shameful that Pakistan's largest city and economic powerhouse cannot withstand rainfall. What begins as a time for rejoicing quickly turns into despair for much of the city, as Karachi's inhabitants contend with flooded roads and houses, overflowing sewerage lines, extended power failures, and traffic congestion. Almost as if making up for the scant rainfall received last year, on Monday and Tuesday the city received 164mm of rain. Tragically, and almost without fail, death inevitably follows the visit of the monsoons. In keeping with the pattern of past years, a number of deaths were recorded from rain-related accidents after continuous rainfall lashed Karachi and other parts of Sindh. Most lost their lives from electrocution due to poorly maintained electricity poles and open wires, while in at least one instance, a man died when the roof of his house collapsed on him. All these deaths and injuries could have been avoided had the provincial and local governing bodies' paid closer attention to the neglected urban infrastructure before the rains arrived. It is not as if Karachi has not witnessed death and destruction following even moderate or low levels of rainfall in its recent history. Just earlier this year, several people died from electrocution following mild rainfall in the winter. Then there is the issue of urban flooding that engulfs the city intermittently, witnessed before in 2006, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2017. According to experts, the causes of flooding remain poor urban planning, with unchecked housing and encroachments being built on the city's natural waterways, in addition to the dumping of solid waste into its drainage network.

Approximately half of the city's population lives in densely packed slums that are built directly on top of waterways and drains. In a cruel twist of fate, the International Organisation for Migration has estimated that a large chunk of these slum inhabitants are themselves climate-change refugees, who moved to the city after facing natural disasters such as flooding and drought in other parts. Additionally, with rapid urbanisation and deforestation, Karachi's increasing concrete spaces do not allow water to be naturally absorbed into the soil. Climate change will only exacerbate these problems in the coming years, for which we are not prepared. True, we cannot always

predict the weather. But it is a pity that we have not equipped ourselves adequately to deal with its challenges.

PTI's man in Ghotki

THE right decision was eventually made, but this itself is hardly worthy of applause considering the ugly episode that preceded it.

On Monday, Minister for Human Rights Shireen Mazari finally issued a notice from her office withdrawing the July 10 notification making Iftikhar Ahmed Khan Loond, a former vice president of the PTI's Sindh chapter, the focal person for human rights in the province.

The irony of Mr Loond occupying such a post was not lost; in late April, Mr Loond was named in an FIR as a co-accused in the brutal torture, including sexual assault, of his former driver.

Following his appointment, Ms Mazari initially responded on Twitter by describing the public outcry as a politically motivated campaign, and claiming that Mr Loond "was cleared of all charges".

He was not. Rather, he had reached an out-of-court settlement with the complainant, ie not an acquittal.

Between these initial and eventual responses, it is worth noting, the Ghotki by-election for NA-205 took place last week. Many have speculated that the choice to stand by the influential Mr Loond was thus a matter of political expediency in order to ensure his support for the independent candidate that the PTI was backing.

Equally expedient was the decision to remove him once his utility was expended. This might be a cynical point of view, but it is certainly no more cynical than dismissing as a political ploy legitimate concerns of a man accused of grievously violating another's bodily integrity being associated with the human rights ministry.

On top of which, questions linger.

The minister cites “new evidence” coming to light as the reason for the de-notification. Can this information be shared, and should it lead to his removal from the party?

Unless Dr Mazari was referring to the earlier (well-known, well-documented) torture case, one shudders to imagine what new details would cause such an about-turn when the outcry over the former elicited little more than a cold shoulder.

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