

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of July 2020

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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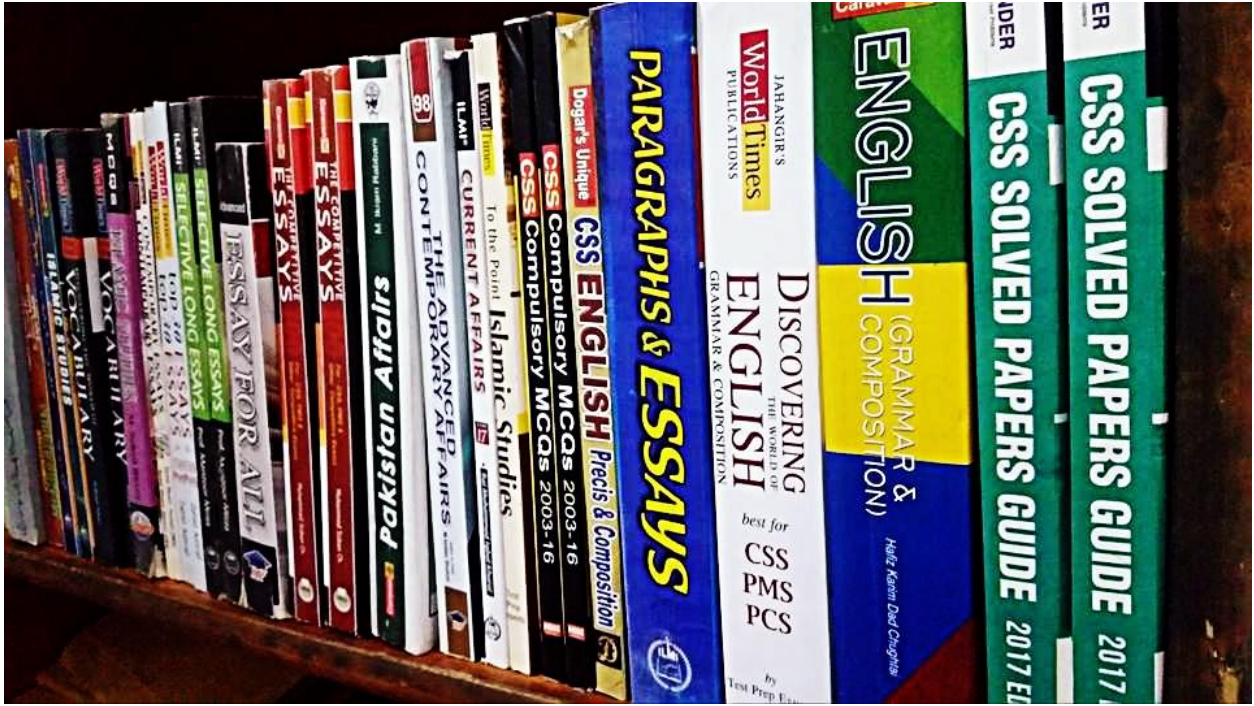
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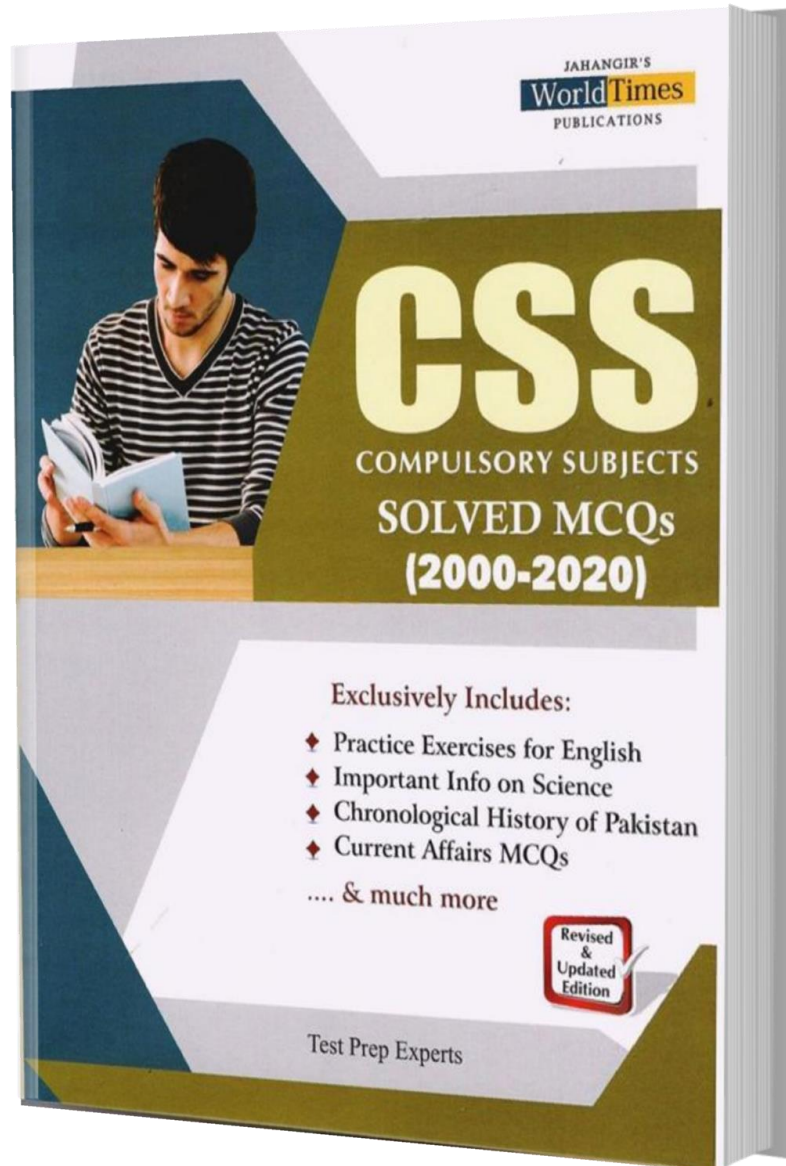


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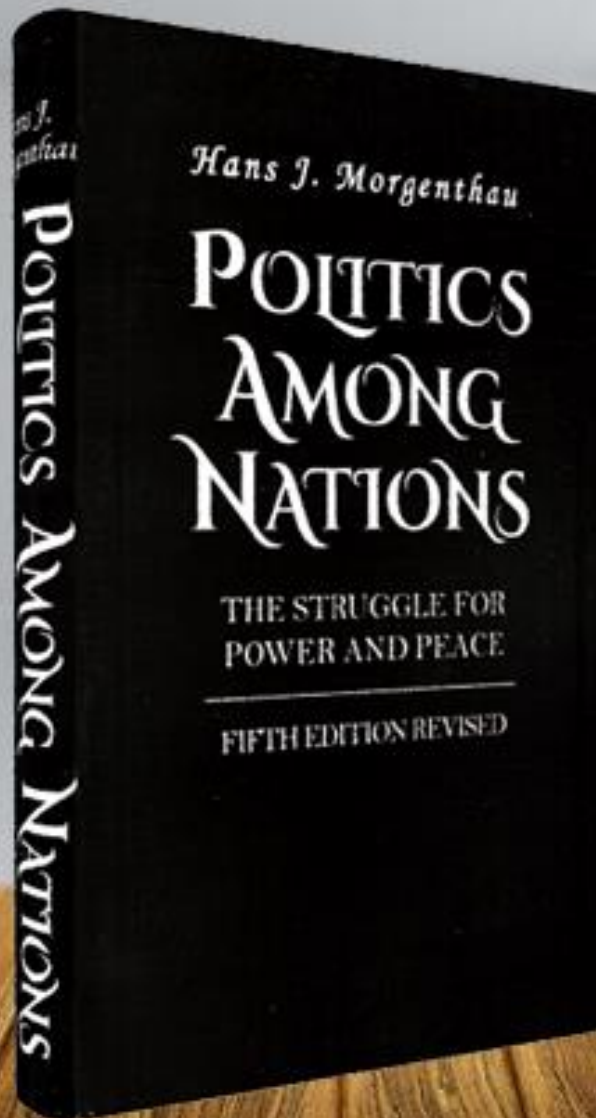
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More testing needed

Reports that new coronavirus cases are decreasing across the country are indeed welcome, but this latest trend must be analysed to get a clear picture of the threat from the infection. According to the National Command and Control Centre chair Asad Umar, the four parameters through which the spread of the virus can be gauged — that is, the number of daily positive cases, number of admitted patients, number of patients on ventilators and number of deaths — have all shown a decrease. While the news of fewer patients being critically ill is undoubtedly positive, the figures for ‘lower daily positive cases’ must be examined further. Anecdotal or circumstantial evidence which suggests that fewer people are approaching hospitals and testing labs should not be the benchmark for assessing the situation.

While there could be multiple explanations behind the low demand for Covid-19 tests, the government’s approach to testing and getting an accurate picture of the spread of Covid-19 in communities should not be linked to the demand for tests. Instead, the health authorities must conduct Covid-19 tests at random in communities across the country and see what the data reveals. In New Zealand, a country with a population about 50 times smaller than that of Pakistan, the average daily testing in the month of April was about 3,500 — a test per person ratio which, if applied here, would amount to about 175,000 daily tests. In a more densely populated country such as Vietnam, the testing ratio of 791 tests for every confirmed case, too, is in sharp contrast to Pakistan’s numbers which show six tests for every confirmed case. While these countries may differ in size, what Vietnam and New Zealand have in common are the fact that both have kept Covid-19 infections low.

New Zealand, which had recently celebrated no new cases, is still aggressively testing and contact tracing travellers entering the country. This information shows that, regardless of the extent of demand for Covid-19 tests, Pakistan’s testing capacity must increase. That authorities were unable to cross the figure of 31,000 tests in a single day is disappointing, and an area where more work needs to be done urgently. The goal for 100,000 tests by July is far from being met, with the recent week recording between just 20,000 to 25,000 tests. According to WHO chief Tedros

Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “Although many countries have made some progress, globally the pandemic is actually speeding up.” Without a cure and with no accurate analysis about the reportedly low figures in Pakistan, precautionary measures and testing for Covid-19 cannot be eased. As the virus spreads in other countries, Pakistan must be vigilant and aggressive in its approach to curb its spread. Complacency in testing and premature celebrations which are not backed by data and science will send the wrong message, and give the public a false sense of security.

Petrol blame game

FEARS that the petrol crisis could trigger a damaging blame game within the government are now coming true. The government has tried to first blame the whole fiasco on the oil marketing companies, then blamed its predecessors for having bequeathed a ‘mafia’ to the country, and is now casting blame on the regulator for not having done enough through the crisis. The central fact at play is that the crisis has grown out of its inability to manage the supply chain at a time of great volatility in international oil prices. Fixing the mess will take more than one price revision. It will take sustained interface with industry, consumer groups, and those with expertise in global oil markets to reform the pricing mechanism to bring about two specific improvements. First is greater transparency, and the second is tighter integration between domestic and international prices. This is what is required to limit the space for manipulative behaviour. Instead, the energy and petroleum ministry seems to be casting about to find a villain in the whole affair.

The oil and gas regulator seems to be the latest in the line of fire coming from the ministry. All through the crisis, Ogra continuously pointed out the mismanagement that was taking place, and warned that an oil supply crisis could result from these decisions if course correction were not undertaken rapidly. Recently, the regulator detailed all its actions as well as the mismanagement of the ministry in a report submitted to the cabinet, which triggered an indignant response from the ministry. In its report, Ogra pointed specifically to the actions of the director general oil in the Petroleum Division, who took it upon himself to alter decisions that had already been made. It also drew attention to the ministry’s lumbering

attempt to try and operate the oil supply chain via command, first by ordering oil marketing companies “to cancel their planned imports” on March 25, a ban that remained in place till April 26, and then by ordering two refineries to resume production to ensure diesel stocks for the harvest season. The ministry also tried to blame Ogra for not doing enough to ensure industry players maintain their required mandatory 20 days’ stock, but the regulator had a clear reply that this was the ministry’s own job. This latest round in the blame game will get us nowhere. The emphasis must be on reform, not blame.

Palestine land grab

IF all goes according to plan, Israel will initiate the latest phase of its colonial land grab of Palestinian territory today by annexing West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley. While international opinion has roundly condemned this blatant illegality, the Israelis have little to fear as they have American support to back them up in this crime. In fact, were it not for Donald Trump’s widely panned ‘deal of the century’ — a euphemism for complete Palestinian surrender and an Israeli declaration of victory that spells the end of the two-state solution — those ruling Tel Aviv may not have attempted such a bold affront to international law. UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet did not mince her words when she said that “annexation is illegal. Period,” while adding that the move would be “disastrous for the Palestinians”.

Ever since the Nakba — the great Palestinian catastrophe, dislocation and mass exodus that accompanied the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 — Zionists have been gnawing away at Arab land. This expropriation gained considerable speed after the humiliating 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and today, if Israel and its powerful patrons go ahead with their grim plan, any hopes of a viable Palestinian state will be buried forever. What Mr Trump’s plan envisages is a bantustan, little more than a glorified concentration camp where the Arabs can be locked up, out of sight and out of mind, while Israel is free to devour choice Palestinian land and plant its flag on it. Both major Palestinian factions — Hamas and Fatah — have denounced Tel Aviv’s plan, with Hamas warning that annexation would be a “declaration of war”. The fact is that the Palestinians have no choice but to

resist; accepting the imposition of an apartheid state on their land will spell the end of the Palestinian dream of a workable state with Al Quds as its capital. The international community must not remain silent in the face of Israeli impunity and speak up for the dispossessed Palestinians.

Lack of restraint

THIS past week's speeches in the National Assembly have showcased emotional outbursts by lawmakers.

As political temperatures soar and conspiracy theories gain momentum, it appears that no one is willing to pull their punches. Rhetoric and personal attacks between political opponents were at an all-time high as speeches peppered with all shades of criticism were delivered.

Among these was one by Prime Minister Imran Khan in which he resorted to remarks that feature so often in his public addresses: he vowed to go after 'cartels and mafias'; blamed past governments for the mess 'inherited' by his dispensation; railed against political opponents for 'corruption and lies'; and mocked the accent of PPP leader and MNA Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

Notably, Mr Khan's speech was made in the absence of the opposition members, who had walked out of the house after a verbal clash with treasury members following the completion of the budget process. Mr Khan's verbal onslaught appears to be a tit-for-tat response to opposition parties' criticism of his governance.

The prime minister must be aware that, while the opposition is criticising him and creating hurdles where it can, it is hardly in a position to oust him. Despite this knowledge, their campaign against him appears to have rattled the prime minister, and he is continuing to spend his energy making tedious, repetitive speeches about how those across the aisle have allegedly failed the country.

Since he came to power two years ago, Mr Khan has repeatedly talked about tackling the culture of corruption that has dogged Pakistan over the decades. With the same gusto, he has decried the huge debt burden he

has inherited and has also reiterated his promise to carry out reform and make drastic changes.

The trouble, however, is that despite his two years in government so far, the present reality continues to mirror the time before he took charge. Where are the reforms and development projects that the current leaders have promised? What has been done to revive the economy, reform law enforcement, improve access to sanitation and drinking water — along with the dozens of other goals the PTI espouses?

After listening for a considerable length of time to Mr Khan telling us what others have done wrong, it is high time the people were told what the government is doing right. Two years have already passed, and in three more it will be an election year again.

Mr Khan must save his defensive ‘container politics’ for later and, instead, concentrate on fulfilling the promises he made to the people in 2018. The PTI had a robust election manifesto but political point-scoring and bickering have taken the government’s focus away from the task at hand. Ranting against political opponents and constantly trying to deflect rumours that hound every prime minister is quite simply a colossal waste of time.

ATC cases

At long last, the legal system is moving towards a more pragmatic approach where the functioning of the Anti-Terrorism Courts is concerned. The Supreme Court has declared that under Section 23 of the Anti-Terrorism Act, ATCs can transfer any case that comes before them to ordinary criminal courts, provided they do so after taking cognisance of it. This ruling, the outcome of a petition against a verdict of the Sindh High Court’s Sukkur bench in 2019, restored an earlier ATC order dated Nov 13, 2018, transferring a case before it to an ordinary court.

The ATCs were set up in 1997 to expedite the prosecution of offences perceived as falling within the ambit of ‘terrorism’. Section 7 of the ATA stipulates that these courts must decide cases within seven days after indictment. In practice, however, even high-profile incidents remain

pending for years in ATCs. The Nishtar Park bombing in Karachi, for example, took place in 2006; the ATC concerned had not decided the case until mid-2018, when the federal government transferred it to a military court for trial. In early 2019, it emerged there were 3,210 cases pending in the 53 ATCs functioning in Sindh. The main reason for the backlog in all ATCs across the country is that the ATA has defined 'terrorism' too broadly; its preamble provides for "the prevention of terrorism, sectarian violence", but then expands the scope of legislation to include the "speedy trial of heinous offences". A landmark Supreme Court verdict in October 2019 sought to define terrorism within more exact parameters. While acknowledging that parliament has arrived at a definition close to the international understanding of terrorism as "a species quite distinct from all other usual and private crimes howsoever heinous or gruesomely executed", it pointed out that ATCs have sometimes not interpreted the ATA correctly. The law, said the verdict, describes terrorism as a "crime with the object and purpose of destabilising society or the government with a view to achieving objectives which are political in the extended sense of the word". Therefore, it held, rather than the outcome or potential outcome, the motive is key to determining whether an act constitutes terrorism. The Supreme Court's ruling on Wednesday should further help streamline the ATCs' working. When cases are wrongfully filed under the ATA — as has also happened in instances of political vendetta — the ATCs themselves can ensure they do not take on an unnecessary burden.

Harsh sentence

IRAN'S appalling decision to execute journalist Ruhollah Zam once again brings into focus states that curb freedom of expression in the name of maintenance of law and order and the protection of ideology. Mr Zam is the son of a cleric who served in the Iranian government in the 1980s. His website AmadNews ran videos and disseminated information which 'helped inspire' economic protests in Iran in 2017. At that time, he was living in exile in Paris. The circumstances of his return to his homeland remain a mystery, but it was reported that he was arrested in Iran in October 2019 and made to stand trial. The death sentence was announced on Tuesday. The journalist was declared guilty under the principle of 'fasad

fil arz' or mischief or corruption on earth. The annoyance and anger that is demonstrated by governments everywhere against the media often turns into harsh action against the latter. Journalists are the first targets of those rulers who are wary of criticism, even if it is justified. With this unwillingness to be shown a mirror, it is not surprising that governments in many countries make it a point to rein in the 'troublemakers' who are out to report the popular sentiment — particularly in places where media protection laws are weak.

In the case of Iran too, it has been difficult for journalists to report freely — especially in an environment where human rights defenders are routinely jailed for raising their voice. There are a number of journalists — 24 of them according to one count in February — who are said to be behind bars. All these cases, topped by the death sentence against Mr Zam, are clearly meant as a warning. This is a strategy that is outdated and ill advised. Journalists are armed with words, and if the state has to respond to them, then it should do so using the same arsenal, ie words — and not bully, beat, threaten and kill them. Ruhollah Zam's sentence must be revoked.

Aviation challenge

BY dropping a bombshell on the floor of the National Assembly last week, Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan opened a Pandora's box of problems that the government seems ill prepared to tackle. Since it has come to light that one-third of pilots in Pakistan allegedly have 'dubious credentials', international aviation regulators have barred PIA flights as more than half of the suspicious licences are held by the national carrier's pilots. The UK and EU's civil aviation authorities have withdrawn PIA's permit to operate from their airports. Moreover, UAE aviation authorities have sought to confirm the credentials of Pakistani flight operations officers and aircraft engineers who hold licences issued by Pakistan's Civil Aviation Authority.

There is no doubt that strict action must be taken against those who are proven to have secured licences through fraudulent means. Even if the licences are genuine, which appears to be the case for some, pilots must

be penalised if it is proved that they cheated in exams. No leniency should be allowed to those who have committed wrongdoing as it is a question of the safety of millions of travellers. However, the government's handling of the scandal has been disastrous. The fact that a list of pilots was drawn up and made public at a stage when an investigation was still underway shows how little thought the government put into this matter. Mr Sarwar was keen to clarify that no new licences were issued by the PTI government, but in his attempt to draw attention to the poor decisions of past rulers, he inadvertently dealt a death blow to hundreds linked to Pakistan's aviation industry — many of them having earned their licences and degrees through legitimate means. All the pilots — and now even other aviation staff — are being judged for having 'acting fraudulently' even before the investigation results.

With this fresh blow, the credibility of all Pakistani pilots and engineers has been called into question internationally. Yet, the story of the rot within PIA and the CAA is not just about pilots. The saga spans decades and is fraught with monumental mistakes made by those in the administration itself. It is unfair to cast doubt on every pilot and technician simply because the government decided to blurt out the workings of a pending investigation. The minister could have approached PIA with the information and given it a chance to suspend flights rather than letting it be banned. The names should have been made public after the probe concluded and action taken against guilty individuals. Unfortunately, it is too late to undo the damage. The task ahead is more challenging still: an intensive review of all protocols and staff training — as well as the planes themselves — is in order. The government must see this crisis through to its logical end.

Kashmir's children

THE list of atrocities carried out by Indian forces in India-held Kashmir seems to be getting longer, while it appears that New Delhi's military machine has thrown all ethics to the wind. In a recent gun battle between Indian paramilitary forces and Kashmiri fighters in Sopore, security men reportedly dragged a civilian, Bashir Ahmed Khan, out of his vehicle and shot him in front of his three-year-old grandson. Extremely disturbing images of the toddler sitting on his murdered grandfather's chest have

been widely shared and illustrate the savagery India is willing to resort to, to keep its grip on the occupied region. Unfortunately, it seems that Kashmiri children are now used to seeing the bodies of their fathers, brothers and other relatives as India seeks to subdue the Kashmiri struggle for freedom and dignity through colonial-era violence. Though local police say reports of this atrocity are 'false', hundreds took to the streets for Bashir Ahmed's funeral, demanding justice and freedom.

If such a reprehensible act had taken place in any other location, there would be a firestorm in the international media — and rightly so — over exposing a child to brutal violence perpetrated by representatives of the state. But when it comes to IHK, as well as Palestine, it seems the world plays by different rules. This blatant hypocrisy must end. Those responsible for this murder, and the brutalisation of a minor, must be brought to justice. But can justice be expected from a dispensation that considers violence against civilians in occupied Kashmir legitimate? According to rights groups, over 30 civilians have been killed in Indian military operations in IHK since January. Even the UN secretary general has taken notice of India's violence against children in the region. In a report released last month, António Guterres asked India to do more to protect children from violence in the disputed region, while adding that minors had been detained by Indian security forces in IHK. The fact is that since those that call the shots in New Delhi can do little to dampen the Kashmiris' desire for freedom, they tend to target the most vulnerable to vent their frustration. Much more needs to be done by the international community to let India know that violence against civilians — specifically violence against children — will not be tolerated. Indeed, it is more than ironic that a country that proudly flaunts its 'democratic' credentials does not flinch when exposing Kashmir's children to violence.

Freedom for Iqbal

THERE are far too many harrowing stories of people languishing in jail for decades in this country before being discovered one day and set free. This is no less than a tragedy where sometimes a lifetime has been spent under the shadow of an impending execution. Freedom is ultimately the triumph of human hope. Or of common sense. In recent days, the story has

repeated itself yet again. Muhammad Iqbal was 17 when he was arrested and sentenced to death — a punishment that should be abolished altogether — in 1998. It took the law of the land almost two decades to decide that the prisoner was eligible to benefit from a law enacted a couple of years later which allowed reprieve, even in retrospect, to juvenile offenders.

The sword hanging over his head, ie the death sentence, should have been rescinded then and there under a presidential notification of 2001, which provided remission to all juveniles sentenced prior to the ordinance. That didn't happen. Justice Project Pakistan, the group that helped the now middle-aged man win freedom, has mentioned some of the efforts made to ensure justice for Iqbal. Letters written to the authorities as far back as 2003 were cited and appeals for leniency were filed in the months leading to the Lahore High Court commuting the death sentence to life imprisonment in February, and then finally culminating in his release on Friday. The case once again calls for a campaign to find similar cases inside jails all over Pakistan and relieve the suffering of prisoners. It doesn't quite befit any country in this day and age to just wait for these 'chance' incidents to occasionally provide comfort to our conscience. It also doesn't suit the system of justice to be going off in various directions in an effort to 'reform' while the basic mechanism which anchors civilisations and law and order remains sadly absent. There is so much that is wrong with our prisons and overall justice system that needs to be corrected.

NSS investors

A RECENT decision by the government to disallow all of the very institutional investors from placing funds in the offered by the National Savings Scheme has narrowed the scope for participation people products the schemes are supposed to exist for. It makes sense to stop participation in NSS schemes of those institutional investors who operate for profit, as has been done since 2003. But pension and provident funds are non-profit entities and operate for the benefit of retirees and salaried people, and these funds should continue to have access to NSS products, because the benefits they derive from this participation go directly to the owners of the

funds, and not the institution. By closing the door on NSS products for pension and provident funds, the government has succumbed to the pressure of owners of mutual funds in particular, who have long lobbied to either be allowed to invest in NSS products, or to turn away pension and provident funds.

The arguments made over the years by the mutual funds are specious at best. For example, they argue that the participation of pension and provident funds in NSS products has a disruptive effect on the financial markets of the country. In order for this argument to hold any merit, it will first need to be established that the returns enjoyed by investors in NSS products diverge significantly from the returns offered on government securities, whether treasury bills or Pakistan Investment Bonds. If there is significant variation in the yield curves of these instruments then an argument for 'disruptive impact' can potentially be made. At the moment, however, returns on NSS instruments closely track the returns on government securities. Mutual funds have also complained about the redemption feature in NSS instruments, describing it as a 'free lunch', but this feature is necessary in a country where funded pension schemes are rare and people have few options to build up long-term savings.

The sad fact here is that those who have lobbied to close the door on NSS products for pension and provident fund managers are actually the ones in search of a 'free lunch'. Instead of improving the quality of the product offerings or sharing the returns they make by investing other people's money, they are trying to grow the size of their market by shutting down other people's access. The reality is that retirement funds are solidly risk averse, and if shut out of NSS, are more likely to expand their participation in auctions of government securities rather than play into the hands of the sharks that rule the private and for-profit financial markets of this country. The government has allowed itself to be played by vested interests in making this decision, to the detriment of salaried and retired individuals. The decision should be reversed.

On merit alone

A CHALLENGE to the concept of merit has fortunately been beaten back. The Federal Services Tribunal has dismissed an appeal against the combined seniority list of male and female sub-inspectors of the Federal Investigation Agency. The appellant, a sub-inspector at FIA-investigation, had asked that the organisation issue segregated lists for sub-inspectors (investigation) and female SIs/ASIs (immigration) as being separate wings. Included among the respondents were the interior secretary, the DG FIA and 74 women FIA officials. The government since 2003 has issued combined seniority lists for FIA sub-inspectors belonging to the same group, on which their promotions are based. However in 2008, segregated lists were issued, based on a sexist presumption that women sub-inspectors were only fit to work in immigration — in other words, at a desk job. According to this mindset, men alone have the skills and mental capacity to undertake criminal investigations. The segregated lists deprived the female sub-inspectors of their upcoming promotions, and allowed newly inducted male sub-inspectors to be promoted earlier than their female counterparts. Naturally, this caused much heartburn and resentment among the women FIA sub-inspectors. They challenged the segregated lists, and finally managed to prevail. Indeed, they had a strong case, given it was based on their constitutional right to be treated equally under the law, and not be discriminated against on account of their gender. As in much of the world, women in Pakistan too have had to fight for equal opportunities. Even while things are changing, especially in the urban centres, the patriarchal mindset is alive and well. It surfaces frequently to 'claim' a self-arrogated right to the choicest pickings in terms of employment or to sideline women from decision-making processes.

In law enforcement, women have proved themselves to be more than capable of shouldering the same responsibilities as their male counterparts even in extremely perilous situations. When the Chinese consulate in Karachi was attacked in November 2018, it was a female ASP, Suhai Aziz, who led the successful security operation against the assailants. A few months ago, a woman police officer won praise across the board for standing her ground against a mob in a Karachi locality in order to enforce the ban on congregational prayers to prevent the spread of Covid-19. As

the struggle of the FIA's female sub-inspectors shows, more and more women are now determined to fight for their aspirations and not let misogynistic elements cow them into playing secondary roles.

Polio in pandemic

THE national tally of polio cases so far this year has already crossed 50. The latest victim of the crippling disease is from Sangtoai in South Waziristan district. All four limbs of the three-year-old boy have been paralysed. Such are the circumstances that he was not administered even a single dose of the anti-polio vaccine. Cases like these from various parts of Pakistan are viewed with disbelief by a world which is at a loss to understand the thinking that leads to opposition to immunisation against polio. As yet, however, there are no workable solutions in sight. What has happened in recent times, on the other hand, is that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided the authorities here with another excuse to cover their inefficiency. Pakistan has told the Independent Monitoring Board for polio eradication that the pandemic is the reason for the surge in polio cases here as it has "hampered routine immunisation and campaigns". The IMB was briefed on various aspects of the anti-polio campaign in the country, a huge task that has engaged the best minds for years. But Pakistan did feel the need to reassure the global monitors that nothing about the national polio immunisation programme would be concealed from them.

Even before the pandemic struck, there were strong signs that 2020 was going to be a bad polio year for Pakistan. The novel coronavirus poses a huge danger and is a test of our resources — in terms of both finances and thinking out of the box. A viable strategy is needed to address other health issues too during the present crisis — such as building tighter networks with the help of our doctors practising at the grassroots. The government has told the public that Covid-19 is a reality that we must all learn to live with. We cannot forever go on blaming our failures and below-par performances on a single emergency. There are other battles in the health sector and these must not be neglected.

Dismissal of a judge

AN administrative committee of the Lahore High Court led by the chief justice has dismissed from service Judge Arshad Malik who was at the centre of a controversy regarding a leaked video. As judge of the accountability court, he had convicted former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the Al Azizia steel mills case while acquitting him in the Flagship reference case. In July 2019, Maryam Nawaz Sharif had released a secretly recorded video in which Judge Malik was heard confessing that his judgement against the former prime minister was given under tremendous pressure. The PML-N maintained this confession proved that Mr Sharif's convictions were mala fide and part of a conspiracy to bring about his downfall. PTI leaders had doubted the veracity of Mr Malik's leaked video and blamed the PML-N for blackmailing him.

His dismissal from service by the Lahore High Court on Friday is of consequence both legally and politically. It is also open to interpretation. Both the PML-N and PTI have claimed this development as a vindication of their positions. While PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz Sharif tweeted saying Nawaz Sharif's innocence had been proved as it was established that Mr Malik's conduct was compromised, Barrister Shahzad Akbar of the Asset Recovery Unit said in his tweet that Maryam Nawaz was also culpable in leaking the video of the judge and could face punishment. The law will, however, take its own course. The PML-N legal team will need to decide how they want to factor in the dismissal of the judge in the Azizia steel mills case, keeping in mind the repercussions on Nawaz Sharif's acquittal in the Flagship reference case. However, it is fairly clear that in terms of a political narrative, the PML-N will use this to reinforce its position that Mr Sharif's ouster and convictions were part of a conspiracy to remove the PML-N from power and usher in the PTI. For its part, the PTI has already taken a position that Mr Malik was compromised by the PML-N itself. The logic may wear thin but in a polarised environment like ours logic can easily be sacrificed at the altar of political expediency.

Of greater concern, however, is the impact of this sordid episode on the overall judicial system. Already burdened with credibility issues, the Judge Arshad Malik affair will raise additional questions about how cases are

handled under various pressures, and judgements likely compromised under duress. It may be a while till we find out who actually made Arshad Malik go rogue, but it is now increasingly becoming clear that elements inside the judicial system are vulnerable to influence from private parties and state agencies. It is obvious that Mr Malik has not been the only one manipulating justice to cater to various agendas. It is high time the superior judiciary took steps to stem the rot.

Rail tragedy

IT was yet another instance of a rail tragedy waiting to happen. The collision between a train and a passenger bus carrying Sikh pilgrims on an unmanned level crossing near Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, on Friday afternoon could have been averted and 22 precious lives saved if the railways had secured the crossing instead of leaving it unattended. The responsibility for the deadly accident lies squarely with the Pakistan Railways. It isn't the first such accident nor will it be the last one unless the railway authorities accept responsibility for the unfortunate incident and start taking action to avoid similar happenings in future. The accident may have reminded many of a similar one a few months back when a train rammed into a passenger bus on another unmanned crossing in Rohri, resulting in the loss of 19 lives. Or of the one near Pattoki where two newly married couples were killed in May. Meanwhile, yet another accident took place on Saturday; at least two people were injured when the Shalimar Express, en route to Lahore from Karachi, collided with a cargo train. Accidents involving trains on railway crossings are quite frequent in Pakistan. Yet no effort is ever made by the railway authorities to properly secure them. Instead, after every accident we find railway officials shifting responsibility for securing these crossings to the provincial governments or blaming road users for being 'too reckless'.

Pakistan has a long history of train accidents owing to years of lack of investment in railway infrastructure and the absence of minimum operational passenger safety standards. Pakistan Railways is not known for its passenger services and facilitation. But that is nothing when it comes to its appallingly bad safety record and deadly accidents. In recent years, the frequency of train accidents, because of derailment and engine

failure, has been increasing. Last year is considered to have been the worst in the history of the railway because of a surge in the number of train accidents and lives lost. Most accidents are not reported by the media because these do not involve the loss of life and are now seen as routine. Surprisingly, the government has for the last two years focused on launching new train routes instead of investing in railway infrastructure and updating its operational safety guidelines. This would involve securing unmanned level crossings in order to prevent fatal accidents.

Uzair Baloch JIT

IN a rather dramatic development, senior members of the Sindh government announced on Friday that they would make the joint investigation team report of Lyari gang kingpin Uzair Baloch, the Baldia factory fire tragedy as well as former Fishermen Cooperative Society head Nisar Morai public. According to the officials, these documents would be uploaded on the Sindh home department's website on Monday. The move has apparently been made to pre-empt a petition by Federal Minister Ali Zaidi, which he had filed in the Sindh High Court in 2017 before the PTI came to power, asking for these reports to be made public. According to the provincial government's spokesman Murtaza Wahab, making the reports public would substantiate the PPP's position that Baloch had nothing to do with the party's senior leadership. However, Sindh-based PTI leaders have questioned the PPP's intentions, and have alleged that the party may upload 'doctored' reports.

While all of this makes for great political theatre and the release of the JIT reports may well dominate the news cycle on Monday, key questions remain unanswered. For example, how was Baloch — who has been sentenced by a military court for espionage — whisked away by security forces in 2017? What prompted his equally mysterious reappearance earlier this year? And was his confession, which supposedly contained explosive details of his underhanded dealings, and friends in high places within Pakistan's political parties, given voluntarily? Instead of using Baloch as a pawn to sling mud on each other, Sindh's political players, especially the ruling PPP, need to ensure that his trials — he reportedly faces over 50 cases for a range of crimes — proceed without delay. In this

way, the crimes he is accused of can be established in court. Indeed, the issue of a nexus between criminal elements and political parties is a very serious one, which is why the truth of the matter must be established in a court of law, instead of through media trials.

Tourism policy

THE government's approach towards reviving tourism in Pakistan appears confused and riddled with contradictions. Barely a month after Prime Minister Imran Khan announced the reopening of the tourism sector — an inexplicable move given the rising numbers of Covid-19 cases in the country — PTDC motels in the north have been closed and employees sacked. Incidentally, Mr Khan had also pointed to potential joblessness in the tourism sector as being a factor in its reopening. According to the notification issued, the federal government and the PTDC board of directors were forced to take the step “due to continuous and irreparable financial losses” suffered by the organisation. Around 25 motels and 300 employees have been affected by this decision; six ‘sick’ PTDC motels and restaurants were shuttered in March last year.

A member of the National Tourism Corporation Board, under which the PTDC functions, has said that the government would focus exclusively on promoting travel to this country and the now closed properties will be privatised. While Pakistan's tourism industry can barely even be described as a fledgling one — at least from the international perspective — its wealth of scenic landscapes, particularly its stunning mountain vistas in the north, has increasingly been getting noticed. The British Backpacker Society ranked Pakistan as its top travel destination for 2018, and last year Forbes termed it “one of the coolest countries to visit”. Unfortunately, the government failed to build on that momentum and goodwill, even though the prime minister has often correctly cited the potential for tourism to become a major source of foreign exchange. Even as recently as December 2019, Wanderlust, the UK travel magazine, singled out Pakistan as its “hot list destination” for 2020. The pandemic, of course, has derailed tourism everywhere.

Nevertheless, many mountains need to be climbed before Pakistan can become a preferred international travel destination. Its image has long suffered on account of extremist violence within its borders. The murder of foreign climbers by militants in Gilgit-Baltistan in 2013 was the last nail in the coffin. Although militancy has been crushed and law and order restored, it will take sustained multidimensional efforts to attract international tourists to Pakistan's shores. According to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019, the country is the least competitive in South Asia in this sector. Reducing visa-processing times and easing restrictions on movement of foreign visitors are sensible measures, but the tourism infrastructure is far from robust and does not inspire the kind of confidence that international travellers look for. In fact, the PTDC motels offered decent budget accommodation, but that too is now off the table. Hosting summits with an array of foreign travel influencers before getting the building blocks in place — such as a hassle-free method for visitors to travel within the country — is akin to putting the cart before the horse.

Religious intolerance

BIGOTRY and intolerance reigned supreme yet again last week, when authorities in the federal capital halted the construction of a Hindu temple in Islamabad. In a commendable move, Prime Minister Imran Khan last month had approved a grant of Rs100m for the historic construction of a temple for Islamabad's 3,000-strong Hindu population which includes public- and private-sector employees, business community members and a large number of doctors. However, a story that began with an admirable decision soon took a dark turn. A group of clerics opposed the building of the temple, threatening action if authorities went ahead with the work. The construction was also opposed by political parties, including the JUI-F and PML-Q. Alas on Friday, the Capital Development Authority stopped the construction of the boundary wall on the plot meant for the temple, citing 'legal reasons'. Although 'legality' and 'fine print' are being cited as the basis for which the construction of the temple wall was stopped, it is evident that the decision to stop building was taken after pressure was exerted by the groups that have so vocally opposed it. Officially, a CDA spokesman said the building control laws of the civic authority clearly

stated that no activity could take place on a plot until the building plan was approved. However, a senior officer of CDA acknowledged that it was possibly the first time that this clause had been enforced as all owners were allowed to construct a boundary wall to ensure possession of their plot even while other formalities continue. Unsurprisingly, just this year, the very same CDA amicably ended a long stand-off with the Lal Masjid cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz by agreeing to give a piece of 20-kanal land for the construction of Jamia Hafsa in the capital. Why can't the Hindu community be obliged in the same manner?

That intolerance has won the day is a sad indictment of the shrinking space for religious freedom in Pakistan. What is more disturbing is that a private news channel claimed 'victory' when the construction was halted — an indication of how deeply religious discrimination has permeated every aspect of society. For too long, this country's minorities have been unfairly pushed against a wall by powerful groups that threaten and blackmail the authorities into submission. This will be a test case for the PTI government and the prime minister, who must ensure that the initial spirit with which this decision was taken prevails.

Women and the vote

IN a significant decision, the Election Commission of Pakistan has mandated that each province have at least one woman district election commissioner. The move is certainly a laudatory one and will hopefully lead to more women taking part in the electoral process, strengthening the practice of democratic decision-making. While the Constitution guarantees women the right to vote, fewer women show up to polling stations on the day of the elections, as compared to their male counterparts, because of a host of setbacks. Despite being half the population, Pakistani women are often treated as second-class citizens due to harmful and pervasive cultural norms that impact every facet of their life: from the quality of their health and education, to income and life expectancy. Increased participation of women in the elections — as voters and candidates — leads to more women-centric laws being tabled in parliament; or more laws that take women's interests and lived realities into consideration.

With the Elections Act 2017, several new measures were introduced to ensure increased participation of women, including re-polling in any constituency where women's turnout was less than 10pc. Additionally, the act of barring women from voting or contesting in elections was criminalised. And all political parties had to nominate women candidates in at least 5pc of their non-reserved seats. The ECP also encouraged the setting up of women-only polling stations, with all-women staff, so there would be less resistance to them voting in more conservative parts of the country. These measures showed success, to some extent, and increased participation by women was noted in the last general elections. However, it will take many years and sustained efforts for entrenched patriarchal norms to be dismantled. For instance, following the 2018 elections, the National Commission on the Status of Women released a report on women's participation and found that even though the number of women candidates increased, the number of women who won on general seats decreased.

Slowing trajectory?

AS the official figures for daily new Covid-19 infections fall across the country, the prime minister wants to ensure that transmission rates continue to slow down as Eid approaches. At a visit to the NCOC over the weekend, Mr Khan said there should be strict implementation of SOPs and that officials should undertake the necessary administrative actions for smart lockdowns. He also stressed on the need for a strong awareness campaign to prevent any 'resurgence' of the disease during Eidul Azha when animal markets are flooded with purchasers.

The official figures for Covid-19 infections are indeed looking positive, but are in sharp contrast to the trend in most other countries where strict lockdowns are not in place. According to the WHO, the world saw the biggest jump in daily new Covid-19 cases on June 28 with 212,326 cases in 24 hours. Given what we know about the fast transmission of the virus, more clarity is needed on why Pakistan's official cases are decreasing. This is a question officials and epidemiologists should examine very closely. It may well be that the government's smart lockdowns have had some effect, and there could be other contributory factors as well. But a

report by BBC Urdu, which has yet to be denied or corroborated by the government, revealed that graveyard burial figures from June 2020 in Lahore and Karachi showed a considerable increase when compared to data from the previous year in the same month. While Lahore registered 1,744 deaths in June 2019, this year there were 3,723 — with just 487 recorded officially as Covid-19 deaths. Similarly, in Karachi, burial data in 32 government graveyards showed 2,375 deaths in June 2019 and 3,594 burials in June 2020. Official Covid-19 burials in these graveyards were recorded at 118. An official quoted in the report said some families hide Covid-19 death certificates from graveyard authorities because of the stigma attached, therefore, it is likely that more than 118 were coronavirus deaths. The Edhi Foundation in Karachi, too, lent weight to this insight by saying that morgues processed more than twice the number of bodies in June 2020 than the previous year.

In light of this information and given that testing is far from the promised 100,000 per day, authorities must investigate why the official figures are so low. Why are more burials taking place in graveyards in major cities this year than in the previous year? Is it possible that some of them are uncounted Covid-19 fatalities? Or is there a possibility that patients with other illnesses are succumbing to them because they were reluctant to visit hospitals or seek medical attention? The government must look at the figures and determine whether or not they are linked to Covid-19. It is far too early to be optimistic — especially when there are fears that lockdowns may be relaxed in the run-up to Eid.

Railway revamp

THE association of train drivers has called upon the Pakistan Railways authorities to focus on “rehabilitation of the [train] track for the safety of passengers, line staff and rolling stock” as the number of minor and major accidents involving significant loss of human lives and railway property continues to rise for some years. The association has also warned of protests if the drivers are asked to operate passenger or cargo trains on the existing tracks without ensuring regular repairs to make them less dangerous. Given the present state of affairs at PR, it seems highly

unlikely that anyone from among the railway authorities is paying heed to this call for making the dilapidated tracks safer for train operations.

The railway is in a total mess because of a number of factors. For starters, it has failed to keep pace with rapidly changing technologies, improve services and invest in ground infrastructure or efficient rolling stock to make its operations safer. Once a popular mode of travel for a large majority of middle-class families, people now avoid trains for fear of their lives. Similarly, in the last couple of decades or so, PR has completely lost its cargo business to road haulage owing to the shortage of freight trains and a highly erratic service. Meanwhile, frequent political interventions for short-term gains, red tape, corruption, a highly inefficient management and a broken business model have made matters worse. Unscrupulous labour unions linked with political parties have also played their part in its downturn. Although the government is working to replace the ground infrastructure of the main line (ML-1) from Peshawar to Karachi with a Chinese loan, hopes for a sustainable turnaround hinge on a complete break from the past. The revival of the railway is not possible without the government foregoing its tight control over its management and freeing it from the clutches of an inefficient civil bureaucracy so that it may operate independently and make timely decisions in the manner of any private corporate entity. Moreover, the government would also need to invest in and develop dedicated freight corridors to win back the massive cargo business to make it profitable. Last but not least, the railway management should be responsible for only maintenance of the ground infrastructure. Privatising cargo and passenger train operations needs to be given serious thought. Without a complete overhaul, there is little hope for a functioning railway in the country.

Pressure on media

THE state of media freedom in Pakistan today is far from satisfactory. The last two years have seen growing pressures of all kinds on the media leading to shrinking space for freedom of expression. Journalism in a democracy is all about speaking truth to power, but doing so in this country carries consequences. The latest in a series of incidents signalling a growing lack of state tolerance is the suspension of the broadcast licence

for Channel 24. Pemra has pulled the channel off air citing some licensing issues but the channel management says they are closing transmission because they cannot face “blackmailing” from the government. Hundreds of people will now lose their jobs.

The trend unfortunately is quite clear. The present government has piled pressure on the media through all means available adding to the existing financial woes of the industry. Recent years have witnessed unprecedented job losses and cutbacks within the industry. While some of this may be attributed to ‘market correction’, much of it is a result of policies pursued by the government in terms of advertisements and non-payment of arrears. At the same time, state pressure to toe the official line and not cross some red lines has led to self-censorship and muted critique by a majority of news organisations. Those that have resisted such pressures have faced punishment through various means including financial ones. Threats of physical violence are also frequently reported. All this undermines democracy and promotes a culture of intolerance and abhorrence for dissent. The culture flows down from the state to citizens at large, and the media becomes an easy prey for scapegoating. With the digital revolution gathering pace with each passing day, now is a good opportunity for the government to facilitate the media so it gains strength and adds greater value to the practice of democracy in Pakistan. The PTI government therefore needs to review its attitudes towards the media industry before hard won-freedoms are put under threat.

Crime in Karachi

SEEN together, the just released JIT reports about the Baldia factory fire and Uzair Baloch’s alleged criminal career shed some light on Karachi’s dark underbelly and the urban violence that blighted the city until a few years ago. Nevertheless, there is little that can be described as major revelations in these accounts. At most, they confirm long-held suspicions pertaining to both the Sept 11, 2012, tragedy as well as the man often described as the kingpin of Lyari gang warfare. The horrific Baldia inferno, in which 259 workers perished, was no accident, but a “planned sabotage/terrorist activity” allegedly carried out by MQM thugs in reprisal against the factory owners for refusing to pay the protection money

demanded. The investigation gives a glimpse of the atmosphere at a time when the MQM ruled Karachi with an iron fist, using fear and violence to intimidate law enforcement, the media and anyone it deemed an adversary. The report describes the initial police investigation into the case as having been carried out in an unprofessional manner that worked to the offenders' advantage. The JIT report about Uzair Baloch reveals details about his espionage activities, a crime for which he was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment by a military court in April. It also lists a large number of targeted killings and politically motivated murders allegedly carried out on his orders.

In Pakistan, and other dysfunctional democracies where institutions of governance are weak, the truth is inevitably a casualty of political machinations and point-scoring. Indeed, the public has justifiably little faith in the willingness of the state machinery to get to the bottom of even the most heinous offences. It does not appear therefore to be too far-fetched to assume, given earlier leaked information from the report on Uzair Baloch, that some inconvenient truths may have been excised from that document before it was released. Maritime Affairs Minister Ali Haider Zaidi alleged as much yesterday. Of course, facts that could have given a more complete picture of how criminal elements are exploited by multiple actors to further strategic objectives were undoubtedly never considered for inclusion in the first place.

The one bitter truth is that the state is indifferent to its duty to protect the people, if that goes counter to its own interests. The three JIT reports — including one on Nisar Morai, former chairman, Fisherman's Cooperative Society — did not see the light of day until long after the crimes in question were committed. Why have hard-core criminals been allowed to get away for years with terrorising civilians? The Sindh government seemed to have only made the reports public when its hand was forced by the provincial high court acting on the petition filed by Mr Zaidi, also no doubt acting in service of political point-scoring. When will the state realise the dire, long-term effects of such sinister games?

Safer for investors

THE confidence expressed by multinational companies operating here regarding an improvement in security conditions in the country will help project Pakistan globally as a peaceful destination for foreign visitors and capital. The manner in which law enforcement swiftly tackled the attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi the other day seems to have reinforced foreign investors' trust in the country's ability to counter future security challenges. The annual security survey released by the Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry that captures the perceptions of the 200 member foreign companies regarding the security environment is a critical assessment of operating conditions in Pakistan. The findings of this survey are taken seriously by potential foreign investors and diplomats. The very fact that the OICCI security surveys have for the last few years recorded positive sentiments expressed by foreign investors about continuously improving security conditions is helping mend Pakistan's international image.

The 2020 survey findings also reaffirm that law and order, especially in the two major business centres of Karachi and Lahore, has improved as reflected by the increasing number of trips to Pakistan by OICCI member firms' senior management from their headquarters and regional offices, as well as the number of their board meetings held here in the last one year. The initiatives implemented in the last five years under NAP to tackle security challenges after the 2014 APS attack in Peshawar have helped improve security in most parts of the country. Consequently, many countries including the US, UK, Portugal and Norway have significantly eased travel advisories for their citizens planning to visit Pakistan. British Airways also resumed its flight operations in Islamabad last year as Pakistan was declared the best holiday destination for 2020 by a reputable British travel magazine. The number of tourists from abroad had been rising in the last few years because of improved security conditions until the Covid-19 pandemic struck the world, forcing countries everywhere to impose lockdowns to halt the spread of infection. However, the challenges remain, as reflected by the militant attack on PSX and periodic protests by certain organisations, disrupting life and business in cities. Besides, the government still has a lot to do to root out militancy in parts of Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Indeed, the country is much safer today than it was a few years ago. Yet there is little to no room for complacency.

Iran nuke sites

AS the Iran nuclear deal unravels, a series of mysterious incidents have been occurring at several sites linked to the Islamic Republic's atomic programme. The most significant of these was at a facility in Natanz last week, which hosts a complex that produces centrifuges. In what has been termed an 'accident', Iranian officials have said there was no loss of life, "but damage is significant on a financial level". Moreover, there have been reports in the international media which claim that dissidents within the Iranian security services may be behind the incident. Due to the sensitivity of the matters concerned, it is very difficult to ascertain the facts, though two possibilities emerge: that of an industrial accident, and sabotage carried out either by Iran's foreign adversaries, internal opponents of the regime or a combination of hostile forces.

If it is indeed an industrial accident, then Iran must consider re-evaluating and scaling down its nuclear activities, for the sake of its own people. It is a fact that Tehran has been battered economically by US-backed sanctions, while it struggles to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. If proper operation of nuclear facilities cannot be carried out due to financial constraints, the Iranian administration must do whatever it takes to minimise the chances of future accidents in the country. However, there is also a strong possibility of sabotage. In the past, America and Israel have been known to launch cyberattacks against Iran's atomic facilities causing considerable damage, while a number of Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated, with suspicion falling on Mossad. If it is indeed true that hostile powers are sabotaging Iran's nuclear programme, then they are playing a very dangerous game. The fallout from an attack on a nuclear facility can be catastrophic, especially for civilians living in the immediate vicinity, which is why such devious activities must be halted immediately, and all sides must work to salvage whatever is left of the nuclear deal.

American exit

INDEED, the American counterterrorism and nation-building project in Afghanistan — much like the Soviet and British imperial forays in the past — has been an unmitigated disaster. While the US invaded Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 ostensibly to hunt down Al Qaeda and punish the Afghan Taliban that sheltered the transnational terrorist conglomerate, today, nearly two decades on, while Al Qaeda may be scattered, the Taliban are very much in the ascendant. And while Washington has lost over 2,400 personnel and spent hundreds of billions of dollars on the effort, there is not much to show for it as the Afghan government and military are widely seen as incapable of running and securing the country once their Western sponsors depart. In such circumstances, and considering it is an election year in America, President Donald Trump's haste to 'bring the boys back home' can be understood. But as a trilateral communiqué jointly issued by Pakistan, Afghanistan and China on Tuesday warned, America's rush to get up and leave before an intra-Afghan peace agreement is in place can pave the way for the resurgence of terrorist groups.

The broad consensus is that if the US and other Western forces leave without an agreement between Afghan stakeholders, the chaos that ensued after the Soviet withdrawal may be repeated. That is why the three sides "urged for an orderly, responsible and condition-based withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan. ..." While the Afghan government would have a tough time maintaining peace in a post-withdrawal scenario, Pakistan and China also have legitimate security concerns, specifically if terrorist groups use Afghanistan as a launching pad to destabilise the region. While the post-Soviet period saw rival Mujahideen warlords battle each other as well as the government in Kabul, this time there are far more bloodthirsty players waiting in the wings, namely the local chapter of the self-styled Islamic State group. If foreign forces were to beat a hasty retreat, the government in Kabul — a weak construct riven by ethnic and tribal rivalries — would be faced with the gargantuan task of fending off the Taliban, IS and other militant groups alone.

There was a ray of hope when the US and Afghan Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha earlier this year. However, there has been no workable counterpart agreement between the government in Kabul and Afghan

factions, principally the Taliban, which is a recipe for disaster. The main issue is the massive gulf of mistrust between Kabul and the Taliban; there is the prickly question of prisoner exchanges between the two sides, while the Taliban continue to hammer government forces. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban need to reconsider their rigid positions for the sake of their country. On its part, the US must realise that while its exit is long overdue, a messy, hasty withdrawal will only add to Afghanistan's problems.

Sugar industry reform

THE federal cabinet's decision to form a Sugar Reforms Committee indicates the government's intention to eliminate the widespread informality in the country's sugar market. The decision comes as a legal battle rages between the government and the industry association over the multiple inquiries ordered against individuals and companies held responsible for the winter sugar shortages and price hike. Though the government is yet to share the mandate of the proposed committee formed in light of the recommendations of the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies, the reforms body has reportedly been tasked with the formulation of a long-term strategy for appropriately regulating and documenting the sugar business, without waiting for the outcome of the court battle.

The sugar probe commission did well by bringing to light the long-standing systemic problems in the sugar supply chain. For example, it has pointed out that the sugar industry is not regulated properly. This allows politically powerful mill owners to fleece sugarcane growers, manipulate the domestic market, steal taxes and blackmail governments into giving the industry huge subsidies in the name of smallholder farmers and urban consumers. The findings of the report have also raised a number of questions regarding the existing, flawed sugar policy and the lack of transparency in the distribution of billions of rupees in subsidy. Government interventions in the sugar market through direct and indirect subsidies given at different stages of the supply chain are ostensibly necessitated by a 'desire' to ensure a fair cane price for growers and lower rates of the sweetener for urban consumers for political reasons. The

probe report shows that none of these objectives are ever met despite huge subsidy spending. Thus, the committee will need to work on two fronts. One, it will be expected to propose actions to document the supply chain to effectively regulate the business and prevent owners from manipulating the market and stealing taxes. Two, it will be required to suggest changes in the existing sugar policy to reduce the government's presence in the market. This will involve the elimination of price controls, removal of restrictions on the establishment of new mills, revision in the policy regulating crop movement, and liberalising the regime governing sugar imports and exports. No sugar-sector reform effort can succeed unless the government decides to pull itself out of the value chain to ensure competitive market practices by shifting from price controls towards a liberal trade regime.

Anti-student action

IN a move that will be a blow to foreign students, American Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced on Monday that international students attending schools in the US may not take a full online course load and remain in the US. The law-enforcement agency said those students whose universities are operating fully online must leave the country, transfer to in-person schools or face deportation. The announcement came just weeks after US President Donald Trump suspended the entry of certain foreign workers to the US — a decision taken on the pretext that it would help the coronavirus-battered economy but one which betrays Mr Trump's anti-immigration motives. The fresh decision that orders foreign students to leave if they aren't attending school in person will have hugely negative consequences for the international student body of about 1.2m in the US. Not only will it add to the already uncertain situation they are facing as universities shut down and go online in a Covid-battered country, it will unfairly force them to leave accommodations they have paid for out of fear that they will be deported.

The American government's decision seems to be senseless, unfair and unjustifiable. It flies in the face of the hopes of so many foreigners who pay thousands of dollars to gain an education and experience university life which is so prized in the US. Ahead of the election, Mr Trump appears to

have pulled many a shocking trick out of his hat, yet the recent move targeting foreign students is a new low and perhaps among the most cruel and illogical. Not surprisingly, even as the United States becomes the country with the highest Covid-19 death toll at 133,000 and 3m cases, Mr Trump tweeted this week to say that universities should open this fall. It appears that ICE's announcement will exert pressure on universities to reopen even if they are not ready, therefore exposing students to health risks. This narrow-minded and unjust decision must be rethought.

Kargil martyrs

TWENTY-ONE years have passed since Capt Karnal Sher Khan laid down his life in the service of his country. On July 7, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa paid tribute to Capt Karnal and another martyr of the Kargil conflict, Havaldar Lalak Jan, saying in a message that the “nation is proud of its gallant sons for valour and unwavering allegiance to defend the country, regardless of the cost”. Indeed, there can be no greater sacrifice, and there are hundreds of such soldiers, mainly from the Northern Light Infantry, who embraced martyrdom on those icy, inhospitable peaks in India-held Kashmir.

And yet, there is still much we do not know about the individual stories of courage, the desperate fight to the death in the face of dwindling supplies of food and ammunition, with artillery fire from the other side raining down on them. The government and the army have remained tight-lipped about the conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbours that set the world on edge, and precipitated the downfall of Pakistan's civilian government a few months later, and yet another military takeover. Most of what we now know about that seminal event is courtesy journalist Nasim Zehra's magnum opus *From Kargil to Coup*. The bare facts are thus: a coterie of four top generals, including then army chief Pervez Musharraf, orchestrated a secret operation that would, they believed, bring India to its knees and compel it to negotiate on the Kashmir issue. It was later criticised as non-inclusive strategising, for it not only bypassed the rest of the military leadership, but reportedly also the civilian government — which would have to bear the brunt of the ensuing censure on the world stage — until the operation was well underway. Moreover, the security

establishment maintained all the while it was Kashmiri mujahideen that had occupied the peaks. Only later, when the bodies of the NLI soldiers started arriving home, did the public — and most tragically, the soldiers' own families — realise the involvement of army regulars.

To worsen matters, the ill-judged operation — which went awry because of the unplanned expansion of the theatre of conflict — dealt a huge blow to the Kashmir cause as it lost Pakistan the support of the international community on the issue. With the intervention of the US president, the country was forced into withdrawing its forces unconditionally. Despite this climbdown, there has been no official word about the misadventure and how it was executed, let alone any accountability for its architects. One wonders if the reticence continues within the National Defence University, where all wars are otherwise dissected as part of the strategic and tactical action course. Surely it is time to air this unfortunate chapter in our history, and learn about the final moments of those who paid the ultimate price for the folly of a few.

The second wave

EIGHT months after the first case of Covid-19 was reported in China, the fast-spreading, potentially fatal coronavirus is still on the rampage. Many countries, including the UK, Spain, France and China have started to reopen as infection rates and the number of deaths drop in the aftermath of strict lockdowns. But as some countries celebrate their success in curtailing transmission, fears of a 'second wave' of infection are very real. This term applies to countries that went through a 'peak phase' during which Covid-19 cases soared, managed to lower the curve and then experienced a second peak. In the UK, which is among the worst-hit countries, the peak phase saw up to 1,000 deaths and 8,000 new cases in a single day. In the absence of a scientific definition of the 'second wave', it can be described as the period when the number of infections goes back up and marks a sustained increase — a scenario which is to be expected in countries that have lifted lockdown restrictions. In the absence of a vaccine, it is inevitable that Covid-19 will spread as restrictions end and people leave their homes. Early indications of a second wave are coming from Spain, France and even Australia which had celebrated taming the

virus and reducing daily infections. In the UK, the possibility of a second wave is not being ruled out. The situation has compelled many to draw a comparison with the second wave of the Spanish flu, which reportedly killed more people than the first wave.

The likelihood of any country being coronavirus-free without strict restrictions in place or an effective vaccine, is non-existent. Infection, hospitalisation and death rates can only be minimised if SOPs are followed. As countries prepare to tackle the next round of peak infections, their success will be linked to public policy measures. Several countries have decided against mass lockdowns due to the economic and psychological effects of one-size-fits-all restrictions. Hence, many leaders prefer targeted lockdowns — as seen in Pakistan — where hotspots with high infection rates will be locked down. The key to these policies lies in mass testing. Without a high number of daily tests, it will be impossible to assess how quickly cases are rising and what level of risk Covid-19 carriers pose to members of the public. Mass testing, systematic data gathering, the enforcement of SOPs and improved hospital support appear to be the only way to protect citizens.

Infringement of privacy

EARLIER this month, the PTA issued a notice extending the June 30 deadline by another month for businesses and individuals to register virtual private networks. VPNs allow internet users to navigate the web securely and privately, and also access blocked content. They are also used by many businesses as an additional layer of encryption to protect sensitive data. VPN traffic falls under the PTA's definition of 'grey traffic'; thus, citing the Monitoring and Reconciliation of Telephony Traffic Regulations, 2010, it is now seeking to control its usage with the express purpose of stopping "losses to the national exchequer".

However, digital rights experts argue that, viewed in tandem with other recent moves — such as the revelation in 2019 that Pakistan had acquired a web monitoring system from a controversial tech firm, or the attempt to introduce draconian social media rules earlier this year — the practice of registering VPNs will not only strip them of their purpose but also lead to

tighter control and surveillance over Pakistani internet users. The fact that these actions are being undertaken with little transparency and oversight, as well as the broad powers conferred on the regulatory authority under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, means that the likely outcome of such measures will only undermine civil liberties in this country further. The Constitution guarantees the fundamental right to privacy as 'inviolable', yet Pakistan's current internet governance framework is skewed towards sweeping, unconstrained cyber surveillance of any and all citizens. The push for users to declare VPNs forces them into the Catch-22 situation of having to opt in to exercise their right to privacy by first opting out of it by registering their intent to do so. In reality, the need of the hour is a complete reappraisal of Pakistan's internet governance laws to ensure their compliance with basic human rights. Far from ensuring greater security, surveillance without checks and balances puts everyone in this country, from the powerless to the powerful, at greater risk.

Pricing medicine

THE drug-pricing issue has once again taken centre stage in the debate on affordable healthcare triggered by the Covid-19 crisis. The government is reported to have approved a proposal to amend the Drug Pricing Policy 2018 to do away with the existing mechanism that allows pharmaceutical manufacturers an automatic, inflation-adjusted increase in their prices. The suggested change may appear innocuous as it doesn't alter the CPI inflation-based pricing formula. But it isn't. It stops pharmaceutical firms from enhancing prices by just informing the health ministry 30 days before implementing the new rates. In other words, the drug regulator Drap will get back its arbitrary powers to decide if and when to increase the prices. The present drug-pricing policy was developed on the orders of the apex court, which was hearing several hundred hardship cases filed by drug manufacturers seeking an upward revision in their prices. Thus, the amendment is likely to reopen the floodgates of litigation, besides increasing bureaucratic interventions in purely business decisions, and spawning corruption. More important, the failure of the regulator to notify the price increase in a timely manner would make production of certain life-saving medicines and vaccines unviable, resulting in their disappearance

from the market as was the case for several years because of a 13-year freeze on drug prices.

Drug pricing has always been a political issue in Pakistan. There is no denying the fact that medicines are a public good. But at the same time drug manufacturing is a 'for-profit' business for investors, who would have to earn enough margins on their products to stay economically viable. No government can expect medicine producers to bear the burden of healthcare costs for it. While it is important for the government to control the prices of essential life-saving drugs, as is the case in Bangladesh and India, the blanket application of such a policy can be detrimental to new investments where capacity expansion, new technology, quality assurance and exports are concerned. Little wonder that several foreign companies have already exited Pakistan and the industry lags far behind its regional counterparts. Unlike Bangladesh, we don't have a single FDA-approved firm in Pakistan and only one out of over 600 manufacturers has been able to secure certification to sell its products in Europe and the UK.

To ensure affordability, the government should improve its oversight of the market to encourage fair competition, improve Drap's capacity to make quick decisions on, say, drug approval, and help the industry reduce its cost of doing business rather than denying manufacturers their legitimate inflation-based price hike. Further, the authorities also need to create a market for generic drugs, the formulations sold under their original chemical name at a massive discount compared to branded ones. The government needs to learn from the regional industry and follow best practices instead of suffocating manufacturers through price control for short-term political gains.

Back to school?

AFTER a nearly five-month closure due to Covid-19, schools and universities in Pakistan are scheduled to reopen on Sept 15. Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood made the announcement at a press conference, saying that educational institutes will reopen with SOPs in place. Mr Mahmood also said that authorities are mulling several options: scheduling classes on alternate days, conducting classes outdoors,

training teachers, recalling students to hostels with maximum 30pc occupancy and enforcing mask wearing and social distancing. All this, however, is contingent upon the lowering of the coronavirus infection rate. If the crisis is not curbed, Mr Mahmood said, schools and universities will not open.

There is no doubt that the closure of educational institutions has been a huge setback for students all over the world. In Pakistan especially, where internet access in many areas is limited, virtual classes have been tremendously difficult to hold if not impossible. For young children, too, the disruption in learning has had consequences for their emotional well-being. Therefore, the authorities' concerns regarding school closure are legitimate. However, taking any decision before the Eidul Azha holiday, which is a couple of weeks away, and Muharram, may not be feasible as there is a fear that infection rates will rise during this time. These fears are evidenced by the government's repeated statements that Eid gatherings and flouting of SOPs will undo the lower reported figures. The prime minister has appealed to the public to mark Eid with simplicity and take precautionary measures. Unfortunately, no SOPs are being enforced at gatherings in animal markets. As a result, one infectious disease expert has predicted a frightening scenario of 5,000 new infections per day. If these violations continue and infections rise, the government should, as it has already indicated, reconsider its decision. Even when the time comes for schools to open — whenever that may be — the planning needs to be meticulous. Temperature checks, distancing, mask wearing and rigorous training of teachers on SOPs will be essential. A safe system will have to be chalked out for those using public transport to get to school. Children who are immuno-compromised or who live with a vulnerable family member may have to be offered an alternative to physical attendance. Teaching staff should be given paid sick leave, adequate PPE and quick testing. This is an uncertain time and uncharted territory for all educational institutions. However, authorities must support students and faculty by providing and enforcing clear guidelines.

Yemen famine

THERE is yet more grim news from Yemen, as the UN says the Arab state is once more on the brink of famine. According to the World Food Programme, around 10m people face an acute shortage of food and that the people's suffering is "unimaginable". Moreover, the country, battered by over five years of war, is ill-prepared to face the coronavirus pandemic. While the official tally says there are around 1,300 cases, experts warn the real number may be over a million, as Yemen's fragile health infrastructure is in no shape to give accurate data. If hunger and disease were not enough, Yemenis live in the constant shadow of death either from the skies, in the shape of Saudi-led bombardment of Houthi positions, or fighting on the ground between multiple factions.

In the immediate future, the international community cannot let Yemen's vulnerable people starve to death. While the Covid-19 situation has greatly complicated matters, funds, foodstuff and safe passage must be guaranteed so that immediate succour can be provided to Yemenis, along with medical aid. But in the long run, there is only one workable solution to Yemen's myriad problems: bringing this horrific war to a swift close. While truces have been called, and broken, it seems the world community has lost interest in Yemen and its forsaken people. Saudi Arabia, the UK and the US have indeed pledged large amounts of aid at a recent donors' event for Yemen. But if they really want to help the country, these states must declare an indefinite ceasefire, and stop providing the weaponry that is helping prolong the war. Moreover, the principal Yemeni actors — the government, the Houthis, the southern separatists — as well as their primary foreign backers including the Saudis, the Iranians and the Emiratis, respectively, must hammer out an agreement that can help end hostilities forthwith, ensure the integrity and stability of Yemen, and give Yemenis a chance to rebuild their shattered country.

Minus one chatter

THE last few weeks have seen feverish discussion on the possibility of a 'minus one' formula being applied to the PTI government. This refers to a hypothetical situation in which the ruling coalition remains on the treasury

benches but replaces Prime Minister Imran Khan with some other leader of the house. As yet, there has emerged no credible evidence that would suggest that such an option is under serious consideration. However, the chatter about a 'minus one' formula got loud enough for the prime minister himself to refer to it in a speech on the floor of the National Assembly. This reference added fuel to the rumour and prompted speculation about a possible replacement for Mr Khan from within his party. The opposition lapped up this fear-mongering knowing that such speculation added to weakening the government.

The fact, however, is that the possibility of an in-house change happening is almost negligible. As long as the PTI forms the government, Mr Khan will remain the leader and there is no real alternative to his leadership of the party. This means all talk of 'minus one' is little more than idle speculation peppered with an intent to create doubts about the sustainability of the PTI government. If the PTI has an irreplaceable leader in the shape of Mr Khan, it is only following the example of most other political parties where families rule as dynasts. A handful of exceptions like the Jamaat-i-Islami may stand apart as organisations where the leadership is truly democratic, but in a majority of other parties the legitimacy of leadership is drawn from its bloodline. Prime ministers may have been knocked out of office in the past through judicial verdicts but as yet we do not have an example of a party ousting its own leader voluntarily. Mr Khan will not be an exception in all likelihood.

This does not mean that all is well in the government. Far from it. There are genuine governance issues bedeviling the ruling coalition and their parliamentary numbers look fairly vulnerable. However, it is important that the government should not become a victim of instigated instability. It has come to power through a public mandate, howsoever contested, and this means it must be allowed to govern to the best of its ability. The opposition has all the right to criticise the government's performance but no one should have the right to try and bring down the government through machinations that fall outside the purview of democratic norms — and that could attract extra-parliamentary forces. Given our turbulent political history, it is critical that the system establishes a semblance of stability so that transitions in leadership happen according to laid-down means. The present system of checks and balances must be strengthened further so

democratic systems and values take deeper root. All talk of 'minus one' should come to an end.

120 more courts?

JUSTICE must not only be done; it must be seen to be done — but the National Accountability Bureau appears entirely indifferent to this oft-quoted aphorism. The concept of accountability, never shorn of political considerations in this country, has over the years become increasingly tainted. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court directed that at least 120 more accountability courts should be set up in Pakistan. It was hearing a suo motu petition about the delays in accountability court trials and was irked by the fact that 1,226 references are pending since 2000, and that five out of a total of 25 such courts have vacancies for judges. According to Section 16 of the National Accountability Ordinance 1999, corruption cases must be decided within 30 days of being filed.

Certainly, the delay is unforgivable. It constitutes a violation of due process rights, and destroys lives and reputations of individuals who may well be innocent of the crime they have been charged with. However, setting up more courts is not going to address the real problem that bedevils the accountability drive. NAB's performance has been so abysmal, its unearthing of prosecutable evidence so pathetic, and its disregard for legal requirements so brazen that it has forfeited any claim to being an impartial and independent body genuinely working to bring corrupt elements to book. So far-reaching have been the adverse effects of its high-handedness that the government some months ago undertook to selectively prune its powers to proceed against businessmen and bureaucrats. The superior courts have time and again taken NAB to task. In March, the Islamabad High Court passed a landmark judgement in which it termed the NAB chairman's arbitrary powers of arrest as running counter to constitutionally protected fundamental rights. In its detailed verdict, the court said "there must be sufficient incriminating material to justify arresting an accused". Indeed, more often than not, NAB prosecutors have been unable to convince the judges why they needed to keep an accused in prison when the detainee was willing to cooperate with them in the investigation. A number of high-profile arrests of opposition

leaders by NAB, such as that of Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Ahsan Iqbal among others, have been grossly mishandled and lent weight to accusations of a political witch-hunt being carried out under the guise of eradicating corruption. It is high time the government restrained NAB from bringing the concept of accountability itself into disrepute.

Hagia Sophia decision

IT is a living monument to history, one that Byzantine emperors, Ottoman sultans and Turkish nation-builders have used to project their power, and the direction the state should take. While opinion is mixed over the change of Hagia Sophia's status — back to a mosque from a museum — the iconic Istanbul structure has a complex history, one that bears witness to the epic changes the region has witnessed since antiquity. On Friday, a top Turkish court decided that the Istanbul landmark would once more become a mosque; just under a century ago, Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey, decided to change it to a museum in his quest to secularise his country. However, current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who some see as wanting to rebuild the Ottoman Empire's prestige, had pushed for Hagia Sophia to once more become a mosque, and has now got what he wanted. Unesco, which had declared the structure a World Heritage Site, said it "deeply regrets" the move while Greece and Russia, who consider themselves heirs to the Byzantine civilisation, have cried foul over the change.

Inside Hagia Sophia's majestic halls, one can witness where empires, faiths and ideologies collided, and left their mark on this magnificent structure. While Christian icons adorn its domes, equally outstanding examples of Islamic calligraphy hang from its walls. The Byzantines had originally built the structure as a church in the sixth century while in 1453 Ottoman Sultan Mehmet 'Fatih', after capturing Constantinople, converted the structure into a mosque. However, Mustafa Kemal —Eurocentric in many respects — changed it to a museum in 1934, while today, Mr Erdogan has succeeded in once more changing its status. Indeed, there are plenty of stunning mosques dotting Istanbul, and one can ask why the Turkish leader has courted a new controversy by changing Hagia Sophia's status. Moreover, Muslim minorities in Europe may face issues of religious

freedom, as rightist governments could use Turkey's decision to deny permission to build or renovate mosques on their own soil.

No FBR reform?

PAKISTAN'S tax policy is regressive, unfair, opaque and complex, and tax administration is one of the most unproductive and corrupt anywhere in the world. Little wonder that there is hardly anyone who shows any trust in the nation's tax system. Though it's a misplaced argument, most people, especially businesspersons, would gladly pay more to the government indirectly than become part of a cumbersome system. The tiny number of tax filers — who overwhelmingly comprise salaried persons — and the collection of more than two-thirds of income tax through indirect withholding or advance tax regimes testify to this sad fact. Similarly, our ports remain porous as Customs allows everyone to understate or overstate the value of their international trade transactions according to their financial interests — albeit for a price. The admission by senior officials of the FBR before a parliamentary panel that refund claims of over Rs532bn had been blocked since 2014 to show higher growth in collection speaks volumes for the performance of its 20,000-odd staffers, and how the board operates to hoodwink government and people alike.

The present tax regime is a major reason behind the distortions in the economy and is at the heart of our fiscal woes as the tax-to-GDP continues to hover around 10pc, one of the world's lowest. Ever since it took over, the current government has been struggling to turn around the FBR. During this period, four FBR chairpersons, including one borrowed from the private sector, have had to leave for failing to improve performance. An attempt to replace the FBR with the proposed Pakistan Revenue Authority in winter was thwarted by its senior officers who refused to accept any restructuring or reform plan unless it was 'approved' by them. Previous attempts at reform had also failed owing to stiff resistance from the board's senior officers. The changes in the now defunct CBR Act in 2007 had resulted in its rechristening as the FBR but there was still no improvement in the revenue authorities' culture or performance.

With the country's fiscal situation becoming untenable mainly because of the FBR's incompetence to document the economy and generate enough tax revenues, the government urgently needs to implement serious tax policy and administrative reforms. These reforms should focus on documentation of the large informal economy, elimination of presumptuous taxation and withholding regime, dismantling of incentives for tax evasion and dishonesty, simplification of tax laws, reduction in indirect taxation, and so on, besides ensuring transparency and full disclosures. The objective should be to evolve a tax policy that supports economic growth and bridges growing inequality in society by removing tax exemptions and taxing all incomes irrespective of their source. As indicated, any move at reform should anticipate opposition from within the FBR. The success of the effort will depend on the government's will to stand up to vested interests for the greater public good.

Hunger & the virus

AS countries tackle the fallout from Covid-19 on the healthcare infrastructure and economy, looming over them is another grim challenge: preventing death by hunger. In a report titled The Hunger Virus, Oxfam International last week drew attention to how rapidly the crisis triggered by Covid-19 and the ensuing shutdown of the economy could fuel hunger in an already nutrition-deprived world. "By the end of the year, 12,000 people per day could die from hunger linked to Covid-19, potentially more than will die from the disease itself," it said. Oxfam, an international charitable organisation which strives to alleviate global poverty, said the Covid-19 pandemic is "the final straw" for millions who were already facing the impact of conflict, climate change, inequality and a broken food system that has impoverished millions of food producers and workers. It pointed out the top 10 "worst hunger hotspots" in the world, including Venezuela and South Sudan that are already facing a severe food crisis which is worsening due to the economic impact of the pandemic. Emerging hunger hotspots include India, South Africa and Brazil, where millions are said to be suffering from the economic fallout. Some organisations have predicted famines of "biblical proportions" as unprecedented quarantine orders and the sealing of borders disrupt trade and create labour shortages.

Moreover, locust attacks in South Asia and Africa will threaten the already dwindling food supply. Oxfam also drew a parallel with big companies, which it said continue to make a profit, and illustrated how eight of the biggest food and drink companies paid over \$18bn to shareholders since January — a sum 10 times higher than has been requested by the UN Covid-19 appeal to stop hunger in its tracks.

In this extraordinary time, the world needs compassion and leadership. Some experts have identified that trade is essential to advancing global food security as the world's transportation system moves staple food that feeds over 2bn people each year. Restricted exports and limited movement of supplies will lead to labour shortages and food shortages in importing countries. There are already examples of countries throwing out harvests due to a shortage of farmhands. Countries must prioritise agriculture as an essential business and ensure that markets have an adequate supply of affordable food. World organisations and governments must work together to deliver food to vulnerable populations, especially women and children and those in conflict zones, so that the most at-risk groups have access to food despite restrictions.

Elephant in the room

IN May, the Islamabad High Court ordered the release of caged animals that were kept in inhumane conditions at Marghazar Zoo. The news led to an outpouring of joy and a collective sigh of relief by local and international animal rights activists who had been campaigning for the release of the zoo's long-suffering, solitary elephant. For decades, Kaavan suffered in silence in his small enclosure — chained, beaten, and starved — and showed signs of severe mental distress. Now, according to a more recent report, Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah has hinted at penalising the minister for climate change and members of the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board for failing to protect the animals under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1890. Just one month before the judgement to transport the animals to a sanctuary, the responsibility for oversight of the zoo was transferred from the Islamabad Metropolitan Corporation to the climate change ministry.

Marghazar Zoo, in particular, had become notorious for being a place where animals went to suffer and die. Besides Kaavan, last year, a video of a bear gasping for breath in the scorching heat was widely shared. The year before that, another companionless bear died due to an apparent brain tumour. In 2018-19, several nilgais died from a suspected viral outbreak, though some believed it was due to a lack of warm enclosures to keep them in at night. Some months before that, six deer were killed by a wolf that broke into their enclosure, while intrusions from wild boars and jackals have also been reported. Beyond the capital, similar deaths of wild animals have been reported from zoos in Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar. The use of animals for entertainment is a cruel and increasingly antiquated concept: exotic animals are brought into the country with great fanfare; only to leave the world prematurely and unceremoniously. If the 'greatness of a nation' can be judged by the way its animals are treated, where would we stand?

Housing scheme

THE policy and fiscal incentives announced by the PTI government to push construction activity has two objectives. First, the ruling party is desperate to deliver on its promise of building 5m affordable housing units for low- to middle-income families. Soon to complete its second year, the government is still struggling to launch its ambitious Naya Pakistan Housing Programme. Some urban public housing schemes announced in Punjab under its banner, for example, have either been abandoned or have yet to see the light of day. Secondly, the PTI is anxious on account of the economic slowdown that set in shortly after it came to power. The stringent stabilisation policies imposed by the IMF deal had further decelerated growth before Covid-19 sent the economy spiralling into recession. The prime minister now hopes to lift the economic gloom, kick-start growth and create jobs by spurring construction activity in affordable housing. But can he?

Ideally, such incentives as a blanket amnesty on investments by end December, a price subsidy of Rs300,000 per unit on the first 100,000 low-cost homes costing up to Rs2.5m, interest rate subsidy for five-marla and 10-marla houses for five years, allocating Rs330bn for housing finance by

banks, and substantial tax relief given by the centre and the provinces to developers and builders should revive projects. But that is unlikely to happen in the short term, at least not in the way the government is hoping for. Such policies have seldom worked.

For starters, the demand for housing remains depressed because of the uncertainty induced by Covid-19 as reflected in consumer surveys in recent months. On the supply side, there's little evidence to suggest the presence of a sufficient appetite for large investments despite generous incentives. As far as mortgage financing is concerned, banks are not likely to take the credit risk unless strict foreclosure laws ensuring minimum judicial intervention are enacted to enable banks to swiftly recover their money in case of default. Even if everything goes according to script, the incentives package will add to the existing urban sprawl, benefiting affluent people and developers/investors rather than create low-cost housing for low-income segments. A better way of channelising private investment in truly affordable housing lies in the government leasing out unused state land in urban and semi-urban areas along railway tracks, highways, motorways, etc for 100 years or more at nominal rentals to developers for constructing high-rises with two- to three-bed units. Such projects should be equipped with education, health and entertainment facilities along with commercial areas. Initially, the government may encourage construction of such housing complexes for its employees up to Grade-16, lien-marking their post-retirement benefits as security to ease investors' concerns. Once the foreclosure laws and mortgage finance industry are restructured, and an enabling environment created, this model could be replicated for the rest of the population without any financial burden on the exchequer.

The power game

AS summer drags on, there seems to be little respite for the people of Karachi where power cuts — scheduled and otherwise — are concerned. This is despite the fact that the prime minister himself has taken notice of the shambolic state of affairs, instructing his aides to take up the matter with K-Electric, the megalopolis' sole power provider. However, despite assurances by the utility to officials, little has improved. Various political parties have also taken up cudgels against the power firm, accusing it of

unscheduled and frequent load-shedding, as well as sending inflated bills to consumers. The Jamaat-i-Islami, PTI and MQM-P, amongst others, have either held protests in front of KE headquarters in the city, or taken out processions elsewhere to highlight the suffering people have to go through without electricity during the unforgiving Karachi summer. The federal energy ministry has clearly blamed KE for the mess, saying that the privatised utility is criticising the government for its own shortcomings. In a statement, the ministry said KE has not made the requisite investment in its distribution system, which is why it is not able to take extra power available on the national grid. For its part, KE has at times complained of a shortage of furnace oil, at others of short supply from the national grid.

For the common citizen, these technicalities matter little when many pay their power bill on time every month, yet do not get uninterrupted electricity supply, especially during the gruelling summer months. Moreover, with thousands of people self-isolating at home due to Covid-19, the issue assumes a more acute dimension. During protests, some parties have called for the re-nationalisation of KE; indeed, the federal planning minister said as much while meeting KE officials over the weekend, telling them the government could take control of the firm if it failed to get its act together. This is a debatable proposition, as the performance of government power companies in other parts of Sindh — Hesco, Sepco — is also far from exemplary. What is needed is clear communication between the state and KE focusing on the point that citizens must get what they pay for: uninterrupted power supply. If emergencies necessitate load-shedding, it must be kept to a bare minimum and publicised in advance. Otherwise, there is merit in the argument of opening up Karachi's power distribution sector to more than one provider.

Killing the virus

AFTER a considerable lull, polio eradication efforts will once again resume in Pakistan. Before the novel coronavirus pandemic gripped the world and diverted much of its attention and resources, Pakistan had been witnessing a spike in the total number of new polio cases. While the figure had been reduced to eight in 2017, then going up to 12 in 2018, 147 new cases were tallied at the end of 2019, and the health ministry was forced to admit a

resurgence of a previously eliminated strain of the crippling virus. Even as all polio eradication activities had been halted in March 2020, barring surveillance, and efforts were redirected to support the battle against the novel coronavirus, the number of polio cases kept increasing. Seven months into 2020, around 60 cases have already been reported across the country, in all the provinces. The polio eradication programme is now set to resume on July 20, and in certain districts, door-to-door campaigns will incorporate awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic, so that families can better protect themselves from the infection and prevent the virus from spreading within their communities. As with polio eradication efforts, misinformation, disinformation and outright lies have surrounded the response to the novel coronavirus, and as new information comes to light with each passing week, it is important for the public to stay updated, follow protocols by health experts, and be aware of the risks. Of course, it is expected that all SOPs will be followed by the programme when the vaccinators pick up where they left off.

We may not yet have a vaccine against Covid-19, but a vaccine against poliomyelitis has existed since the 1950s. Its creator famously refused to patent it, saying 'the people' owned the patent. But beyond vaccination, the spread of many diseases, including Covid-19 and polio, has in some part been attributed to poor hygiene and sanitary conditions, and the inaccessibility of clean water. This will also need to be addressed.

Aviation crisis

THE rot in Pakistan's aviation industry is deep and extends far beyond the national flag carrier. Now the FIA has registered a case at its Corporate Crime Circle, Karachi, against the private airline Shaheen Air International and arrested its director. The action has been taken following an inquiry initiated by the Civil Aviation Authority lodging a written complaint alleging that the airline had caused a loss of over Rs1bn to the national exchequer. According to an FIA official, the investigation found that SAI had defaulted on paying CAA's flight operation charges and levies from March 2018 till date. The airline's operations were suspended in October 2018; and even as 2,800 employees clamoured for their outstanding salaries, SAI's owners fled abroad. The charges against the airline management are serious, and

the case must be taken to its conclusion. While this is a different issue from that of the pilots 'dubious' licences — revealed in a bombshell statement by Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan last month — it nevertheless is also a manifestation of the lack of fiscal and operational discipline within the aviation industry as a whole. At the time, eight SAI planes were already grounded for being in "poor condition". In December 2015, a Boeing 737-400 operated by the airline suffered severe damage upon landing in Lahore; 10 passengers were injured. A few months earlier, five of its aircraft had been grounded because of recurring safety concerns.

The minister's revelation that 262 Pakistani pilots had suspect credentials — in tandem with the initial investigation report on the PK-8303 air crash — has cast the role played by the industry regulator, the CAA, in an extremely poor light. According to Mr Khan, 141 of the pilots concerned had been flying for PIA, 10 for Serene Air, nine for Air Blue, and the rest for chartered plane services and flying clubs. On Saturday, the CAA apprised the Supreme Court of the measures it is taking to prevent unauthorised access to its licensing and examination system. The 'dubiousness' of the licences evidently stems from the fact that certain pilots had had proxies sit the exam for them. There are also allegations that corrupt elements within CAA have deliberately made the examination process perverse and convoluted, making recourse to unfair means — for a price, of course — more tempting. While the pilots are certainly not blameless, the onus was on the regulator to ensure the integrity of its testing protocols.

A large number of pilots have been grounded for apparently having obtained their licences through questionable means, as they should be, but it is also worth asking what action the CAA is taking against its own personnel. Any investigation, to be credible and untainted by accusations of ulterior motives, must unearth those involved in corrupt practices at the CAA and sanction them accordingly. The festering problems in the aviation industry need a root-and-branch overhaul.

Transit trade

THE decision to restore the transit trade facility for Afghan exports to India through the Wagah border should go a long way in reinforcing Islamabad's

political and economic ties with Kabul. Islamabad has already resumed bilateral trade and the transit trade facility at all the border crossings with landlocked Afghanistan, which largely depends on Pakistan for its trade with most of the world. The resumption of the transit trade facility via Wagah will help strife-ridden Afghanistan immediately boost its exports to India and support its economy. Pakistan, which has played a critical role in the US-Afghan Taliban peace accord, had restricted bilateral trade with Afghanistan while completely stopping transportation of Afghan goods to India through Wagah under the 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement in March. The decision was taken as part of the lockdown enforced across the country to halt the spread of Covid-19. However, the suspension of transit trade was viewed with suspicion in Kabul and had drawn criticism from both the Afghan administration and traders who were forced to airlift their cargo at a much higher cost or use the longer sea route to ship their goods to India. Many saw it as a violation of the APTTA owing to the trust deficit between the two nations.

The APTTA, which was brokered by the Obama administration to replace the outdated 1965 accord, is also considered 'incomplete' by many in Kabul because it does not extend the transit facility to India to ship its goods to Afghanistan and beyond because of fractious Pakistan-India ties. Indeed, a joint South Asia-Central Asia corridor offers huge potential for increasing regional trade. At the time that the APTTA was concluded, many were hopeful of an eventual reduction in tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi, and expected both nations to extend transit facilities to each other. Sadly, it has not happened. Instead, the two sides' fragile economic relationship has deteriorated further in recent years, owing largely to the brutality of Indian forces in India-held Kashmir, thus pushing away the goal of a free-trade area in South Asia. India, being the regional economic powerhouse, should realise that its growing disputes with its neighbours are keeping it and the region from realising their true economic potential. The sooner it starts mending fences with smaller neighbours, the better it will be for the future of the people of the region that houses the most number of the world's poor.

Eid livestock markets

ALONG with being a key religious festival and cultural event, the Eidul Azha sacrifice is a major engine of economic activity in Pakistan, with a multibillion-rupee economy of its own. From livestock traders to butchers and the tanning industry, all have major stakes in the sale of sacrificial animals. However, this year — like all other areas of life — routine religious and economic activities related to Eidul Azha will have to adapt to the reality of the novel coronavirus. Primarily, the authorities will need to prevent big gatherings in livestock markets where men and beasts in large numbers converge. As experts have warned, this is a matter of great concern where the spread of Covid-19 in the country is concerned. The prime minister himself has said that if people are ‘careless’ during Eidul Azha the number of cases in the country could spike, while some doctors’ associations have called for cattle markets not to be held. Meanwhile, the National Command and Operation Centre on Monday decided to allow smaller livestock markets — but greater in number apparently to prevent crowding — on the outskirts of cities, with ‘strict’ SOPs in place.

While on paper this seems like a workable solution to balance religious and economic requirements with precautions against the virus, the fact of the matter is that SOPs are widely being flouted across the country where markets have been set up. With Eid just over two weeks away, the authorities must enforce the SOPs to ensure that those rushing towards livestock mandis don’t become super spreaders of Covid-19 upon their return to their neighbourhoods. Children must strictly be kept away from the markets, and instead of whole brigades descending upon mandis to choose an animal, one person should be enough. Moreover, there is wisdom in the suggestion of offering collective sacrifice to streamline matters, while organising qurbani in mohallas and on the streets should strictly be off limits this year to prevent the spread of the virus and to maintain hygiene.

Wheat woes

THE food bureaucracy has made a mess of the wheat market. It has sown the seeds for another serious crisis as it tried to avoid a repeat of last

year's flour shortages. Now it is looking for scapegoats. The policy of procuring maximum wheat at a support price of Rs1,400 per 40kg by keeping flour mills out of the competition has led cereal prices to spike in the open market. The government allowed millers to enter the market only after it had dried up. The marketable crop surplus, which wasn't bought by the government, had already been stocked by speculators hoping to make a quick buck. Consequently, wheat prices in Punjab have soared up to Rs1,900-Rs1,950 per 40kg, and in Sindh to Rs1,750-Rs1,800 per 40kg. The increase has forced flour mills to stop private purchases because of the official cap on retail flour prices based on the subsidised public wheat quota issue rate of Rs1,475 per 40kg. The provinces have been compelled to start releasing wheat quotas to millers from public stocks much earlier than usual to keep the market supplied with affordable flour.

Now the prime minister wants a crackdown against 'hoarders', hoping that fear of action would lead those stocking up to liquidate their wheat stock to avoid its confiscation, thus helping to reduce prices for flour millers. But that is unlikely to happen, with prices set to climb to new highs in the coming months. The crackdown may delay the inevitable but won't prevent it unless the wheat policy is corrected, as such action and price controls seldom work.

The country has harvested a much shorter crop this year than targeted. The carry forward stock isn't enough to meet requirements. There are a few possible short-term solutions to avert a wheat flour shortage. Permitting millers to charge a higher price for flour and other products they produce from expensive wheat imported or bought from the local market could be one solution. The other could be the government subsidising expensive imported wheat to keep prices affordable for consumers. Or it may stop subsidising retail flour sales by increasing the official wheat issue price to bring it at par with the cost of imported wheat. This will enable importers to bring in grain without fear of losses owing to a large price differential between local and imported cereal. The long-term solution lies in deregulating wheat trade. Currently, the government purchases a large portion of the marketable surplus of crop at a price, which is usually much higher than the international price of the commodity, to support smallholders. It also gives it leverage to fix subsidised retail flour prices for urban consumers. Further, it restricts imports through tariff barriers and

controls export. This policy has resulted in massive losses in subsidies, leakages and corruption. The long-term solution lies in the government's limited presence to ensure a competitive market.

Protecting females

WOMEN legislators in the KP Assembly have voiced their anger against growing incidents of underage marriage, sexual abuse and murder of children. They have demanded answers from the provincial government over the delay in legislation that criminalises child marriages and domestic violence. The outcry was sparked due to ghastly incidents in recent weeks: the marriage of a disabled 12-year-old girl to a teenager which culminated in her death allegedly at the hands of her in-laws in Lower Dir; the marriage of an 11-year-old girl in Torghar district, and the rape of a 13-year-old in Charsadda district. During the session, Nighat Yasmin Orakzai of the PPP correctly pointed out that, although the Punjab and Sindh assemblies had already passed laws to stop domestic violence against women, KP is yet to legislate on early marriages or domestic violence. In response to Ms Orakzai's demand for "aggressive legislation", the province's law minister informed the house that a proposed law regarding domestic violence against women had been referred to the house's Select Committee, while the Child Marriage Restraint Bill would also be presented before the cabinet.

That KP lawmakers have dragged their feet on such crucial legislation for so long is symptomatic of a larger problem: the lack of political will to protect women and children from abuse and violence. Child marriages are a violation of fundamental human rights and have serious repercussions on the health, education and well-being of the girl as well as her family. While there has been some consensus in the KP Assembly about bringing a law that criminalises child marriage, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Marriage Restraint Bill, 2019, is yet to be passed. Even this consensus was reached after months of wrangling over the issue of the 'permissible minimum marriageable age' for a female — a debate which reflects how deeply fraught the issue of something as basic as children and women's

protection is. On the issue of domestic violence legislation, there has been even more resistance from religious parties, who, along with the Council of Islamic Ideology, have created hurdles in bringing about the needed laws. It has been over a year since KP's ministers pledged that pro-women legislation would be enacted. In the absence of these laws, vulnerable citizens continue to suffer while politicians avoid the issue. The PTI, which has now been in power in KP for two successive terms, must prioritise the passing of these laws to guarantee constitutional protection for women and children.

PML-N leader's remarks

WHILE mudslinging and point-scoring may be part and parcel of politics, certain issues should not be exploited by opponents just to get back at rivals. For example, when questions of religion are dragged into political debates, this can have dangerous consequences in a society like Pakistan, as we have witnessed in the past.

PML-N leader Khawaja Asif has been under fire, particularly from religious parties, after comments he made in the National Assembly last week. On Tuesday, Mr Asif had to clarify his remarks, saying that "misinterpreting" his statements was "extremely irresponsible and wrong".

The former federal minister had said that "no religion is superior" under the Constitution, apparently speaking in reference to a social media campaign targeting Pakistan's minority citizens. Religious parties had leapt at the remarks, in reaction to which Khawaja Asif had to reiterate his belief in Islam and its tenets in the house.

The fact is that a great fuss is being created out of a non-issue. From his remarks, it appears as if Mr Asif was reiterating his belief in the fact that all citizens are supposed to be constitutionally equal, regardless of caste and creed, in Pakistan. Unfortunately, obscurantist elements treat any statement in support of minority rights as an attack on Islam.

Over the past few weeks, we have witnessed a major campaign against the building of a Hindu temple in Islamabad, as well as religious parties targeting academics in Sindh for making 'controversial' remarks. These

incidents show that there is still quite a way to go where the goal of achieving a moderate and tolerant society is concerned.

However, in matters of political debate especially, politicians and lawmakers should refrain from loosely terming remarks 'blasphemous', due to the consequences such dangerous accusations entail. Lawmakers should in fact be setting examples for the public by creating an atmosphere that encourages debate and tolerance of opposing viewpoints, instead of unleashing abuse upon rivals simply to score a few cheap points, and potentially putting lives in danger.

Confusion abounds

THE erratic and ham-fisted handling of the scandal over the Pakistani pilots' licences issue is sowing further confusion. The Civil Aviation Authority, in what seems to be a direct contradiction of Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan's bombshell revelation a few weeks ago that nearly 40pc of Pakistani pilots had "fake licences", has said that all licences it has issued to pilots are "genuine and validly issued".

The assertion was made by CAA Director General Hassan Nasir Jamy in a letter to a senior official of Oman's aviation authority, which has expressed concerns about the credentials of Pakistani pilots working in Oman-based airlines.

Further, Mr Jamy said that the CAA had verified/cleared the names of "96 Pakistani pilots out of 104 names received from various civil aviation authorities/foreign airlines". According to him, the matter has been "misconstrued and incorrectly highlighted in the media/social media".

The allegation against the media is patently untrue, a red herring meant to deflect from what has been a fiasco ever since Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan made his shocking claim on the floor of the National Assembly. He presented as established fact a matter that was still under investigation, saying unequivocally that 262 pilots had had proxies sit their exams. At a press conference a few days later, he gave a breakdown as to which Pakistan-based airlines the pilots concerned were working for, with

the rest employed by foreign airlines, chartered plane services and flying clubs.

PIA grounded 150 of its pilots over their allegedly 'dubious' licences. In subsequent weeks, news began to trickle in about batches of Pakistani pilots, although only those employed by overseas airlines, being cleared by the CAA of having dubious credentials.

Meanwhile, the reputation of the country's aviation industry — particularly its flag carrier — and Pakistan's regulatory authority, has suffered a grievous blow. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency has barred PIA from operating to Europe for six months; the UK and US have also banned PIA flights.

There is also a semantic boondoggle at play here. The CAA is correct in stating that the licences are genuine, in that they have been issued by the authority certified to do so. Some of them may, nevertheless, be dubious. After all, the CAA recently apprised the Supreme Court of the measures it is taking to secure its examination and licensing systems — which is an implicit admission of procedural failures.

What is beyond doubt is that the aviation minister and the CAA are not on the same page. One wonders what Mr Khan's objective was in publicly levelling such serious allegations when the facts had yet to be established. If it was to 'expose' previous governments' culpability in the decline of the national airline, the resulting earthquake has created a crisis from which the country's aviation industry will take a long time to recover.

Transpeople's inclusion

REEM Sharif can be counted among the bravest people in the country as she speaks about a recent mission in an interview with a news agency. It involved her standing up to and pacifying men upset that the person "they thought was their brother had always been a sister". Reem Sharif is hailed as Pakistan's first trans police officer and works for Tahaffuz Centre, a pilot project run by the Rawalpindi Police to protect transgender people. Already, she has shown a lot of purpose. Apart from talking sense to the brothers of the transperson mentioned above, she has been instrumental

in preventing another from being thrown out. It is not confirmed whether she was able to do that through the sheer power of her legal argument or the authority vested in police. However, success stories like these are essential to sustain the campaign. In a good sign for a force that could do with agents who — at least theoretically — have easier access to all dark and semi-lit corners of society than the average desk-bound constable, no less than 40 trans people have visited her centre “out of curiosity”. Also, 16 cases in two months is sufficient proof that transpeople have problems they would prefer to take to one of their own, as opposed to a person of another gender.

The apprehension of being humiliated and presumed guilty on account of one’s gender stems from societal attitudes not least painfully reflected in Reem Sharif’s own experience. Quite despicably, education and exposure appeared to have added to her woes; her college days were a time of great suffering for her. Her story, then, is a classic example of what a huge difference the state’s practical assertion can make to a campaign long fed solely on public-awareness messages. In the past few years, transpeople, said to number 500,000 in Pakistan, have been given active help by the state in discovering their identity and finding economic opportunities. Having them in authoritative positions in departments such as police will go a long way in establishing their credentials. But let us try and rationalise it. Trans police officers resolving problems of transpeople is a huge step. Yet it still puts these long discriminated against and gender-determined section of humans at a distance from the mainstream. True inclusion will only be achieved when a person is able to deal with another without any consideration of race, sect, ethnicity or gender.

US Covid-19 response

CONFIRMED Covid-19 cases in the US are reaching record levels, exposing the poor leadership amidst a horrific global pandemic. On July 15, a new peak of 67,400 cases was reported, which followed a week of over 62,000 cases per day — a figure triple the average number of cases from just a month ago. To the apprehension of doctors and scientists, US President Donald Trump remains casual and continues to attribute the increase in cases to ‘ramped-up testing’. Director of the National Institute

of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci has contradicted Mr Trump's claim, and said the recent surge in cases is a sign of an expanding outbreak and not increased testing. Unfortunately, not only is Mr Trump's laid-back outlook on the pandemic in sharp contrast to Dr Fauci's concerns, the White House has even engaged in bizarre attempts to discredit the respected health expert.

That the US president is taking the outbreak of this potentially fatal virus lightly is a sad indictment of America's present-day position as the so-called leader of the free world. From the very start, Mr Trump's messaging on Covid-19 has been lackadaisical and starkly opposed to the ominous warnings being issued by top American experts who predict that the virus is taking on an even more dangerous trajectory. After indulging in a racist blame game with China over the source of the infection, Mr Trump is still not making responsible decisions. Not only is he rarely seen wearing a mask in public, his energy and time in recent weeks have been devoted to attacking the media and downplaying the Covid-19 threat. In fact, Mr Trump and his administration have called into question the decisions of the WHO, and pressured the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. The president's reckless and irresponsible attitude towards the pandemic is a major reason behind the high number of daily cases and death rates in the country. Poor political leadership and weak messaging have resulted in American citizens paying a heavy price.

Jadhav affair

THE strange saga of convicted Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav took a twist on Thursday when Pakistan offered diplomats from the Indian high commission consular access, but New Delhi's officials walked out in a huff, claiming that Pakistan did not offer them "unimpeded access" to Jadhav. Even though consular access was offered a third time on Friday, it was uncertain whether the Indian side would accept. The Jadhav affair dates back to 2016, when the spy — apparently a serving Indian Navy officer — was caught in suspicious circumstances in Balochistan. The fact that an Indian individual was caught in such a sensitive location added to suspicions over his activities. The military's PR wing later released a confessional statement attributed to Jadhav, in which he made some

sensational disclosures. Apparently working under a Muslim cover name, Jadhav said he was overseeing some of the operations of RAW, the Indian intelligence agency, in Pakistan, particularly activities in Balochistan and Karachi. Based on these facts, Jadhav was awarded the death sentence by a military court in 2017, following which India went to the International Court of Justice. While the ICJ has stayed the execution and asked Pakistan to review the original verdict, the court also rejected India's calls for his release.

From the above it is clear this is not an open-and-shut case, and the charges Jadhav has been tried on are very serious. Pakistan has done well by granting consular access, while it has also allowed the spy's family members to meet him. However, the Indian attitude has, true to form, been quite rigid. The Indians claimed they were not allowed "free conversation" with the convict during Thursday's meeting. As stated above, considering the charges he has been convicted of, it is naive to expect Pakistan to grant full access to him without taking security precautions. The foreign minister also reiterated the fact that "India's attitude has always been negative in this regard".

Instead of politicising the matter, India needs to work with Pakistan on this issue to ensure the ends of justice are met, and the ICJ verdict is respected. Rather than sulking and not availing the opportunity, the Indians need to take advantage of consular access Pakistan is offering. New Delhi should go ahead and file the review and reconsideration petition, as the Foreign Office has pointed out. If this issue is resolved through diplomatic norms and legal means, it could pave the way for the resolution of other tricky disputes between both neighbours. Certainly, due to the seriousness of the charges and the downturn in bilateral relations this will not be easy. But if both states behave like rational actors, a way out can be found. Clearly, if India is willing to deal with Pakistan with respect for its sovereignty, the deadlock can be broken.

Desperate times

PUNJAB Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar is feeling the heat of rumours that he may be passing through a particularly vulnerable phase in

his tenure. His lieutenants have responded to the allegations of inaction that Prime Minister Imran Khan's 'model ruler' from southern Punjab has come to personify in various accounts. The Buzdar version of reality — that appeared in an international paper — in the face of relentless speculation about his imminent departure from the seat of power in Lahore, draws upon his unobtrusive persona. It lists his activities over five to six days before he is declared a man of action. Those defending Mr Buzdar have wanted to project him as a low-key worker. But, invariably, comparisons with his predecessor's proactive and far more visible governance come in the way. Thus, the quieter parallel has been discarded, even in the attempt to stave off his challengers within the PTI. The frequency and intensity of his supporters' reassurances have left little doubt that their boss is fighting for his life.

For other pointers that rekindle memories of past chief ministers fighting for survival, an as-yet smallish group of PML-N provincial lawmakers has found the moment opportune to hobnob with Mr Buzdar, who is looking for as much extra support in the assembly as he can muster. Then, never to be left out of the chessboard are the Chaudhries of Gujrat, who know how to assert their importance and when to do so. They know numerous ways of showing off their deep social, political and, indeed, religious linkages, which makes them invaluable to most power aspirants in Punjab. They have so far been cautious not to give any bold anti-Buzdar signals, but these veterans can also be the first to note that things are getting desperate for Prime Minister Imran Khan's much-hailed 'Wasim Akram-plus'. Mr Buzdar's slow pace and the absence of the ruler's swagger in his personality are posing a problem for him, as evident in the time he is taking to defuse the threats against him. Each passing day seems to make him all the more vulnerable. It is as if Mr Buzdar is yet another one of those who believe that getting the title was an end unto itself and that it is enough to punctuate one's rule with promises of exciting milestones. Action must never be dependent on explanation in words, even if one's listener-mentor happens to be as accommodating as Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Risk to medics

THE tragic death of a respected surgeon in Multan has sent shockwaves across the medical community. Dr Mustafa Kamal Pasha, who was also the vice chancellor of Multan's Nishtar Medical University, passed away this week, a month after contracting the coronavirus. Dr Pasha was diagnosed with Covid-19 on June 14 and was under treatment at a private hospital in Multan. He was put on a ventilator on July 6 and succumbed to the virus a week later. Many in the medical community as well as his patients are mourning the loss of a top doctor in south Punjab. His death also underscored the truly deadly manifestation of Covid-19, which is easily transmissible. His passing serves as a harrowing reminder of the great sacrifice that our front-line workers are making in the ongoing battle against Covid-19.

Nurses, doctors and hospital staff are faced with an unprecedented situation as they deal with patients infected with the novel coronavirus. Since the beginning of the outbreak, Pakistan's medical community has been warning people against gathering in crowded spaces, and asking them to take precautions as they fear that large numbers of patients would make it difficult for hospitals to cope, as in Europe during the virus's peak. While we may not have arrived at that stage, healthcare workers continue to undertake their medical responsibilities at great personal risk — much like Dr Pasha who put his life on the line. Hospital staff members have to wear protective suits, face masks, goggles and gloves for hours during their shifts as they treat suspected and confirmed Covid-19 patients. Many of them fear for their family members as the risk of contracting and transmitting the virus to them is significant. This undoubtedly results in high levels of stress and takes a huge toll on the mental health of the medical community. It must be acknowledged that these workers are taking incredible risks in the face of this deadly virus. The government and public should take measures to ensure that the threat to healthcare staff is minimised.

Misplaced optimism or good news?

THE government's recent assertion that the rate of confirmed Covid-19 cases in the country is declining merits closer examination. According to the planning minister and NCOC chair, Asad Umar, the positivity ratio — determined by the number of people testing positive for the coronavirus out of the total number tested in a day — has gone down. The minister asserted that, whereas in mid-June the rate of those testing positive was 22pc, that percentage has now dropped to around 9pc as only 2,145 people out of the 24,262 tested on July 15 had been confirmed positive. Mr Umar also shared a breakdown of the Covid-19 data from June 1 to June 15 to demonstrate that daily average tests at 23,403 in that period resulted in approximately 5,056 positive cases. Yet from July 1 to July 15, he said, 22,969 daily tests returned 3,097 positive cases. His response to the opposition parties who were criticising the low Covid-19 figures as a result of fewer tests was that the low positivity ratio reflects the success of the government's preventive measures. This lowering of the ratio, while ostensibly welcome news, warrants a thorough examination which is only possible in one way: the constant collection and detailed analyses of data.

Experts all over the world have demonstrated that virus trends can only be forecast by reading data — which is gathered when mass testing is conducted over a period of time. At present, Pakistan's trajectory of confirmed Covid-19 cases is outwardly encouraging, yet appears to be an anomaly when compared to the trends in the rest of the world where mass testing has revealed alarmingly high transmission rates. The low reported figures in the country have left health experts here puzzled, and many of them have speculated about the possible causes. One has suggested that the decline could be associated with the presence of a kind of "non-specific immunity" that is unique to the Pakistani population. However, such theories must be proven before they can be accepted as reality, and the road to collecting facts towards that end is mass testing. A survey conducted by the National Institute of Health in Islamabad contradicts the government's view as it suggests that the number of people infected in the capital could be around 300,000 — the vast majority of whom are asymptomatic. This survey should compel authorities to ramp up daily testing, which is still between 23,000 and 24,000 — a daily testing figure

which is one-fifth the number of the previously announced target of 100,000 daily tests.

In the absence of mass testing, speculation and claims of victory have little value. Instead of cherry-picking the version of the Covid-19 trajectory which is most acceptable, the authorities must commit to quadrupling the number of daily tests to ascertain what the actual spread of the virus is in Pakistan. Anything short of that will create a false sense of security.

Population projection

A RECENT study published in the Lancet medical journal estimated that the world's population will experience a peak in the year 2064 (9.73bn people), before seeing a sharp decline at the end of the century, with an estimated 8.79bn people inhabiting the planet in 2100. The figure stands in contrast to an earlier projection made by the United Nations, which stated that the global population may peak in 2100, with approximately 10.9bn people — 2bn higher than the latest estimate. However, the more recent journal study estimated that more than 20 countries will witness their populations reduce by half or more, including Italy, Portugal, Japan, South Korea and Thailand. The most populous country in the world, China, will show a drastic reduction from 1.4bn to 732m people in 2100. Meanwhile, India will overtake China as the country with the highest population, peaking at 1.6bn people before declining to 1.09bn in 2100. In contrast, several African countries will witness an increase in their populations, and Nigeria is expected to swell up to around 791m, surpassing China, which is projected to have the third highest population by 2100. With 336m people, the United States is anticipated to have the fourth highest population in the world in 2100, followed by Pakistan (248m) at fifth place.

Even at this time, Pakistan has the fifth highest population in the world, trailing behind only China, India, the United States and Indonesia. The current number of people in the country stands well over 200m, and Pakistan also has one of the highest annual birth rates in the world. And yet, despite the fact that this population boom has far-reaching consequences, affecting every aspect of social development and service provision, the issue is not treated with the urgency that it deserves. The

Lancet study attributed the projected lower global population growth rates to “continued trends in female educational attainment and access to contraception” in much of the world. In order to keep fertility rates low, the researchers recommended continued policymaking to improve women’s reproductive health. However, in a seminar last year, the special assistant to the prime minister for national health services explained that about half of all married women in Pakistan do not use or have access to modern contraceptive methods, resulting in over 3m unwanted pregnancies each year. Until women’s lower social standing and lack of agency is addressed and remedied, this nation will not be able to realise its true potential.

Monsoon chaos

THE monsoon season in the subcontinent should be a time of great joy, with wet weather bringing respite from the stifling summer heat. But in Karachi, rainfall brings a feeling of dread, with citizens fearing long durations without power, flooded streets and dangling electric wires ready to electrocute any unfortunate soul that should come in contact with them. Sure enough, on Friday, after a brief spell of rain this script was followed to a tee in this unfortunate metropolis, with at least two people electrocuted, massive city-wide traffic snarl-ups and wide thoroughfares turning into canals. If a few millimetres of rain were enough to bring the country’s economic capital to its knees, one shudders to think what the situation would be in case of sustained heavy rainfall.

The reasons for this sad state of affairs are multiple. Primarily, decades of neglect by federal, provincial and local governments have left a legacy of decaying infrastructure and failed institutions in this city. In Karachi, solid waste disposal, the drainage and water supply system as well as other basic issues of urban management have fallen victim to a vicious turf war between the PPP-led Sindh government and the MQM-steered city administration. The result is that no one is willing to take responsibility for failures; the easy way out is to blame political opponents. While multimillion-dollar projects have been announced to fix Karachi’s drainage system — which has collapsed, as was evident on Friday — the fact is that only an effective local government system, led by professionals concerned with public welfare rather than political apparatchiks, can fix the city’s

multiple urban problems. The Sindh government has clearly failed while trying to act as a glorified municipality for the megacity; the mayor has also failed to deliver the goods with whatever powers he has available to him. It is time Sindh's political stakeholders worked out a proper, empowered local government system for the province's urban areas, as the status quo is simply not working.

Where is Ehsanullah?

IT is curious that despite Ehsanullah Ehsan, former spokesman of the banned TTP and later its splinter group Jamaatul Ahrar, having engineered a miraculous 'escape' from the security agencies' custody in January, there seems no effort to recapture him. In fact, the government has barely mentioned him at all except to confirm his flight, which Interior Minister Ijaz Shah undertook to do in the most offhand, cursory manner during a chat with journalists. Ehsan, meanwhile, does not appear to have opted for a low profile. A Twitter account reportedly used by him has been fairly active, and reflects the bloodthirsty mindset one would expect of his kind. Among the more disturbing recent tweets from this account is a death threat against PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, saying that the latter would meet the same fate as his mother, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto. On Friday in the upper house of parliament, the PPP rightly demanded to know what Ehsan's current status was, with Senator Sherry Rehman asking why he was not in custody. Further, she said, the government must disclose the details of his ostensible escape and tell the nation who had a hand in it.

Not many people will ever forget the chilling smugness, even glee, with which Ehsan would claim his organisation's responsibility for carrying out acts of heinous violence. His surrender to the security forces in April 2017 was described by the then DG ISPR as evidence of the low morale of terrorist organisations in the face of the military operation. No details were given at that time about how the surrender came about, or whether it was part of an immunity deal. Ehsan himself, however, had much to say in an interview to a private TV channel, distancing himself from the TTP and accusing them of carrying out terrorist attacks at the behest of RAW and NDS. Ehsan's escape in January this year, announced in a short video

message on Feb 6 by the latter himself — thereby confirming a report to the effect in an Indian publication a few weeks prior — was met with shock and anger in Pakistan. A group representing the families of the APS massacre victims went to court, seeking contempt of court proceedings against a number of government, security and intelligence officials for the development.

That this mouthpiece of depraved terrorist organisations is able to roam free, apparently making his noxious ideas public and hurling threats against members of Pakistan's political class, is outrageous. That the government believes it can remain tight-lipped about this issue is unacceptable. The public has a right to know more about the circumstances surrounding Ehsan's so-called escape. Until individuals like him pay the price for the evil they have done, there can be no justice for the victims of their crimes and no peace for the grieving families left behind.

Foreign capital

THE large jump in the non-debt, job-creating flows of FDI into the country last fiscal is an encouraging sign in the wake of the challenges posed by Covid-19. The long-term foreign investment is reported by the State Bank to have spiked by 88pc to reach \$2.6bn from the previous year. According to the bank's data, the power sector, telecom industry, and oil and gas exploration sectors have attracted the largest portion of fresh foreign capital, mainly from China, Norway and Malta. Indeed, these are the second highest FDI flows into Pakistan in the last 11 years. Yet, it remains less than 1pc of the nation's GDP and much below the real economic potential of a country of 210m. Another major problem is the concentration of FDI in domestic-oriented sectors, which in the long run has significant foreign exchange costs for the country in the shape of outward remittances of profits and dividends.

Given the long history of Pakistan's balance-of-payments woes and its need to boost industrial output, especially for enhancing its exports, the country has always been looking to mobilise foreign resources, mostly in the shape of official assistance. Since official bilateral and multilateral

assistance has been increasingly scarce for the last one decade, or comes with stringent political and policy strings attached, developing countries such as Pakistan are left with little choice but to muster long-term FDI as well as boost their exports and workers' remittances to support their balance-of-payments position. Sadly, Pakistan has never been a choice destination for long-term investors. Nor have successive governments tried to make it a policy priority like other regional nations. We especially have negligibly low FDI in the export-oriented industries. There are a number of factors — poor regulatory environment, bureaucratic red tape, inconsistent business and economic policies, a weak macroeconomic framework, country perception, etc — that have led to mobilisation of low FDI volumes despite offering a liberal policy regime. While FDI flows account for less than 1pc of Pakistan's GDP, our regional rivals, such Bangladesh, India and Vietnam, have successfully attracted foreign investment up to 5pc to 6pc of the size of their economy, and mostly in the export sector. With our exports and workers' remittances feared to remain subdued during the present fiscal because of Covid-19's effects on the global economy, the government needs to take urgent remedial policy actions to maintain the present FDI momentum and direct it towards the export-oriented manufacturing industry.

Going green

WHEN need inspires innovation, Mother Nature is more than willing to help out. Pakistan's National Parks Service is the result of an interplay of economic requirements, environmental considerations and human and natural resources. It is modelled on the American agency, and its inaugural programme, the Protected Areas Initiative, was launched at the start of this month. It is going to cover 15 national parks in the first phase. The ultimate aim is to prop up designated green areas across the country, promoting them from their current status as 'paper parks'. Just as Prime Minister Imran Khan is impressing upon fellow Pakistanis the importance of thinking green, the national parks initiative is being promoted as a crucial landmark to realising the PTI's vision. It is indeed a promising venture whose fulfilment could lend more credence to the PTI's insistence on declaring its 10 billion-tree campaign a tsunami. The government is introducing the first

phase of the project as meeting the economic needs of the local community. Some 5,000 jobs are going to be on offer for the community. Hopefully, a sense of ownership will also be the outcome of the local connection.

The initiative appears to put the country on the right path towards a better, more livable natural environment. Officials say they realise that this positive development has to be backed up by policy and legislation ensuring greater protection of parks and green areas. The sooner this is done the better since much time has already been lost. Pakistan declared the Khunjerab National Park a sanctuary for rare species way back in 1975 — during the tenure of the country's first popularly elected government. The venture paid dividends but something happened along the way which allowed greed to encroach on Pakistani green. Forty-five years later, the trees, the parks, the greenery are all part of a sanctuary we desperately require for ourselves as a threatened species gasping for breath. It is a sanctuary within reach that we can no more afford to ignore.

Dual nationality

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has taken the right step to order all advisers and special assistants to the prime minister to declare their assets and nationalities. This step is in line with his long-held position on ensuring transparency in the running of the government. The declaration of these assets and nationalities may have triggered a debate but it is the right debate to have in order to settle some long-standing issues and bring much-needed clarity to the prevailing ambiguity. The most glaring instance of such ambiguity is the issue of dual nationals working in important government positions.

Article 63 (1)(c) of the Constitution very clearly states that people holding dual nationalities cannot become members of parliament. This means elected members of the cabinet can also not be dual nationals. However, non-elected members who sit in cabinet meetings have so far evaded this restriction. It may be time to review this anomaly. The logic behind disbarring dual nationals from holding positions that enable access to classified information is a sound one. Legally speaking, dual nationals

have split loyalties because they have taken an oath of allegiance in two countries. This logic can easily be applied to those non-elected people who sit in cabinet meetings and exercise executive functions in the running of ministries and divisions. They may argue — as some have — that they are not proper members of the cabinet and are invited by the prime minister for each meeting, but this is at best a technical argument aimed at justifying the anomaly. The advisers and SAPMs have the same access to policymaking and classified information that other cabinet members enjoy. This makes their role within the government as dual nationals highly problematic.

This is not to say that dual nationals cannot contribute to public service in the country. Pakistan has a very large diaspora across the world and many overseas Pakistanis continue to excel in their respective fields. Their talents and experience can be invaluable for public service. However, if such service were to include elected responsibilities then parliament will need to review the bar against dual nationals contesting elections. But even if parliament voted to amend the constitutional provision and allow dual nationals to become legislators, it would still be difficult to apply the same logic to both elected and non-elected members of the cabinet on account of their access to sensitive matters of state. It is then morally wrong for dual nationals to stay as members of the cabinet. Now that it is officially known which SAPMs within the federal cabinet hold dual nationality, it is advisable for the prime minister to review their status in the light of his own previously held position against dual nationals in key positions. The prime minister should find their replacements and utilise their services in any capacity outside the cabinet. He should live up to his own words.

Baloch approach

IT is impossible to avoid the topic of the missing people of Balochistan for too long. An estimated 5,000 people are on Balochistan's list of the disappeared. Every now and then, there is a new story about a person who has gone missing or a follow-up of an older one about someone who had disappeared a long time ago. This is how it has been for many years; there has been no reprieve for those who have been in perennial protest mode

ever since they staged their inaugural demonstration against forced disappearances outside the Quetta Press Club 11 years ago. The daily protest sit-in began there on June 28, 2009, after Dr Deen Mohammad went missing, notes Reuters in a feature. Most tellingly, the news agency also describes how the recent attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi “came a day after hundreds of relatives of missing Baloch gathered in Quetta to mark the four thousandth day of their protest since the disappearance of Dr Deen Mohammad”. The mention of the militants and the protesters in the same breath would indicate how easy it is to conflate the two. While it is true that there is a history of state oppression, economic deprivation and provincial partisanship behind the long-running Baloch insurgency led by organisations adamant to carry out terrorist attacks, often in the name of the disappeared, it is the latter that must be treated as a human rights issue. For too long have people been picked up, never to be heard of again, or their mutilated bodies found months later. Many, including the families of the victims, have accused the state which has yet to institute a fair system of justice and accountability for those it deems dangerous.

There are fears that the latest upsurge in high-profile militant action by certain groups claiming to represent the ‘deprived’ sections of the Baloch population could well lead to hasty policy decisions. And indeed there are several instances of typecasting on the basis of caste, creed, ethnicity etc. The answer lies in the opposite direction. Elements in the equation must be separated — there are those who have protested peacefully for years and then there are the angry young men determined to target state institutions and interests. This should be followed by implementing a fair, transparent formula to engage first with those who are ready to talk and then go on towards the angrier sections.

Vandalising the Buddha

A VIDEO of a group of men vandalising a centuries-old statue of the Buddha in Mardan shows the extent to which intolerance and ignorance have permeated our society. Recently, four men were digging in the district’s Takht-i-Bahi area — a Unesco World Heritage Site containing relics from the Gandhara civilisation — when they came across a life-sized

idol of the Buddha. The video shows the men taking a hammer and smashing the statue to pieces. The reason behind this savage act, according to initial reports, was the incitement from a local cleric. District police sprang into action when the video went viral on social media. They have arrested the four men who appear to have acted together to destroy the statue.

Not only is the incident a painful reminder of how respect for minority religious beliefs is shrinking in the country, it also shows an ugly side of Pakistan to the world. Buddhist tourists from many countries in recent years have travelled to Mardan to marvel at the artefacts in Takht-i-Bahi where archaeologists have dug up hundreds of relics over the years. That some people can so easily and mindlessly destroy a 1,700-year-old relic out of foolishness and abhorrence for faiths other than their own points to the failure of the local administration to educate the public about the significance of such artefacts. In the past, two Buddhist statues had been found in Sheikh Yousaf village of District Mardan when people were digging a grave — statues which were handed over to officials of the archaeological department. Unfortunately, when the latest statue was discovered, instead of informing officials, the men smashed it and even captured their vandalism on a phone camera. The mindset that allows such an act to take place and be documented is one born of intolerance and bigotry. The culprits must be punished, according to the law, and the administration should reflect on its failure to educate the public about the religious and historical significance of these relics.

SC's denunciation of NAB

THOSE who run the National Accountability Bureau should hang their heads in shame — if they have any capacity for it. The anti-graft body has often been censured for its modus operandi but this time around, no less than the Supreme Court has excoriated its workings as being patently unlawful, unjust and in furtherance of a political agenda. Authored by Justice Maqbool Baqar, the 87-page judgement in the Paragon City case describes the matter as “a classic example of trampling of fundamental rights, unlawful deprivation of freedom, and liberty and the complete disregard for human dignity as guaranteed by the Constitution”. The two-

judge bench had granted bail on March 17 to the accused, former railways minister and PML-N leader Khawaja Saad Rafique and his brother Khawaja Salman Rafique, overturning a rejection of their bail plea by the Lahore High Court on June 18 last year.

The court has perceived NAB's conduct in this case as part of an unmistakable wider pattern that speaks to objectives far removed from any notion of accountability. The verdict notes the bureau's reluctance to act against one side of the political divide even where huge financial scams are concerned, while "those on the other side are being arrested and incarcerated for months and years without providing any sufficient cause even when the law mandates investigations to be concluded expeditiously and trial to be concluded within 30 days". How else can this be interpreted but as a witch-hunt, the very antithesis of accountability? Pursuing a political vendetta in this guise only erodes the people's faith in governance, exacerbates political divides and brings the democratic process into disrepute. Indeed, when mechanisms of justice are manipulated into serving instead as instruments of persecution, it puts the very future of a country at stake.

The Supreme Court verdict reiterates that NAB's actions violate the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty', which is included in the UN charter of human rights. The bureau chairman's powers to arbitrarily carry out arrests have proved a convenient stick with which to beat the opposition — and the odd recalcitrant journalist — with. Taking an individual into custody on allegations of corruption and keeping him there is a surefire way of destroying his reputation in the court of public opinion, even when evidence is flimsy or non-existent. The humiliation inflicted over the past few years by NAB on numerous bureaucrats who allegedly carried out illegal orders by 'corrupt' politicians, has rendered the bureaucracy virtually catatonic. A number of businessmen were also hauled up by NAB; that did not have a salutary effect on the investment climate in the country and the law was tweaked accordingly. Now that the Supreme Court has weighed in so unequivocally, the government must sit with the opposition and thrash out new accountability legislation, one that actually serves the ends of justice.

Post-Eid conference

THE ingredients were all there. A PML-N delegation had just called on PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari in Lahore that is considered an auspicious venue for nascent movements. A multiparty conference is set to be held after Eidul Azha. Yet there is something missing. At the gathering of members of the country's two biggest opposition parties, the setbacks that make things easier for the PTI government were noted. But true to tradition, there was no great search for a new direction, not even a sustained common ambition. It can be said though that the ground had been better prepared this time. Mr Bhutto-Zardari arrived in Lahore against the backdrop of a consultation he and his father, Asif Ali Zardari, had held with Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who is almost certainly going to be a very important component of any opposition alliance against Prime Minister Imran Khan. The PPP chairman also contacted Mian Shahbaz Sharif after landing in the Punjab capital to further prepare the ground for talks on a joint front that Mr Bhutto-Zardari has been very keen to create for some time now. But whereas he would be hoping that the long-stuck opposition ship is about to set sail in the right direction, the reluctance reportedly shown by Mr Sharif over participating in the conference could represent a huge hindrance.

All talk of PPP and PML-N must start with a basic question: can they ever trust each other? In this particular case, Mr Bhutto-Zardari is out to sell a messy option to a true connoisseur of drawing-room games. He is taking a route that the PML-N's own politicians have found difficult to tread. Mr Sharif may be indisposed and thus a doubtful starter for the MPC. However, his party colleagues, as well as opposition politicians such as Maulana Fazlur Rehman, betrayed by friends while he was on the march to Islamabad, can confirm how unyielding Mr Sharif can be to demands of protest, let alone street agitation. Impatient, pro-action opposition elements would have been more comfortable dealing with Mian Nawaz Sharif or Maryam Nawaz. That was not to be and now they are confronted with the task of ensuring that their post-Eid huddle is successful. It is too big an occasion to be marked by merely deriding the government. The opposition alliance led by the PPP and PML-N has to ensure the presence of all stars and come up with a plan befitting of an Eid milan party.

UAE Mars probe

SPACE, the final frontier, has fascinated man since time immemorial, and in the modern age aiming for the stars has become a matter of national prestige. At the height of the Cold War, the Soviets and the Americans competed fiercely in the space race, sending chimps, dogs and eventually humans into space. However, it was the Americans who took a 'giant leap' by putting Neil Armstrong on the moon in 1969. Ever since those heady days, countries have been trying their best to add their names to the elite spacefaring club. On Monday morning, the UAE made significant progress through Al Amal, dubbed the first Arab mission to Mars, launched from a Japanese site. The UAE had only some time ago put its first astronaut in space.

Due largely to its backwardness in all things scientific, the Muslim world has been a laggard in the space race. While the first Muslim in space was a Saudi prince — Sultan bin Salman, son of the current king — who hitched a ride aboard an American shuttle in 1985, Muslim states have made slow advances in space exploration, mostly guided by technology developed by others. The fact is that whether it is space travel or any other branch of advanced science, the Muslim world does not have much to boast about. While the world of Islam blazed trails up till the Middle Ages, ever since the colonial and postcolonial eras there has been mostly silence. Apart from Turkey and Iran, most Muslim states are consumers of scientific knowledge, not producers. The reasons for this are many; primarily, Muslim rulers have not been too bothered about promoting scientific learning and innovation, while decaying education systems create mostly rote learners. Even the oil-rich Arab sheikdoms, who have built skyscrapers with foreign expertise, have not inspired their pampered native populations to innovate and excel. A truly exciting day will be one when students in the Muslim world will have the training and academic vigour to chart their own way to the stars.

Changing dynamics

THE geopolitical calculus in Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood is clearly changing, and those who formulate this country's foreign policy must plan

now to ensure we are comfortably placed to take political and economic advantage of the emerging scenario.

Over the past few days, reports have emerged of a 25-year strategic bilateral deal involving China and Iran being hammered out between the two sides; the deal is said to cover both economic and military aspects.

Moreover, relations between the US and China seem to be going into a deep freeze, with some talking of a new 'cold war' between Washington and Beijing. The US has ordered the Chinese consulate in Houston to close in order to "protect American intellectual property", with China slamming the move as "outrageous". Moreover, on a recent trip to the UK, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for building a "global coalition" against the People's Republic.

Considering Pakistan shares borders with both Iran and China, and has had a long, chequered relationship with the US, Islamabad will need to play its cards right to protect national interests on the highly treacherous international chessboard.

The Iran-China deal — said to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars — offers an opportunity to Pakistan. While Pakistan enjoys cordial relations with China, this can be a good occasion to improve relations with Iran. China seeks to build a 21st-century Silk Road in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative, envisioning a global network of trade routes emanating from Beijing. It is in this context that it seeks to cement a deal with Iran, while CPEC is also a product of the same strategic thinking.

On the other hand, Tehran — struggling to stay afloat under crushing US-led sanctions — will gladly accept foreign investment, as well as a chance to sell its oil and gas. Pakistan can play a positive role in this budding relationship, with a chance at becoming a key conduit in an energy and trade corridor linking the Eurasian hinterland to South Asian and Gulf ports.

But there is a catch. As stated above, the US is in a combative mood vis-à-vis China, while Iran has been Washington's bête noire for over four decades. America has already spoken in unflattering terms about CPEC, while it is widely believed India has backed out of Iranian projects in order to avoid enraging Washington.

To take advantage of regional developments, Pakistan will need some deft diplomacy. Regional integration can help this country and its neighbours economically and politically if proper planning is done. The US must be told that while Pakistan values its relationship with America, Islamabad cannot isolate itself regionally by alienating neighbours with whom Washington does not get on.

India should also weigh its options; does it want to chase the fantasy of becoming a US 'strategic partner'? Or would it rather live in peace and prosperity with its neighbours?

Journalist's abduction

JOURNALIST Matiullah Jan has survived another scare. Though back with his family now, his abduction on Tuesday in broad daylight in the heart of the capital underscores the terrible insecurities of life in this country. The air is rife with speculation that Mr Jan, who is a vocal critic of the establishment, had been picked up by certain security agencies. There is also a theory that he had been whisked away on account of some personal enmity. But, in light of the frequent harassment of the media by the powers that be, the former assumption clearly carries more weight. Indeed, Mr Jan's detention period could have been far longer had the anger and concern over his abduction not been so great. Journalists, both individually and through their associations in Pakistan and abroad, politicians, diplomats, legal experts and civil society at large were appalled by the incident that occurred at a time when Mr Jan is facing contempt proceedings in court. What also appears to have been a crucial factor in his return are the close-circuit cameras that captured the images of mysterious figures trying to nab their target outside a school building. The footage showed that Mr Jan resisted before he was overpowered and driven away.

Mr Jan has had close shaves before. In an earlier instance, his car had come under attack. Then, as now, civil society demanded action against those who seemingly were out to threaten the outspoken journalist. Then, as now, the verdict against Mr Jan was that he had taken an adventurous route to distinguish himself — a mode of reporting that verges on the

accusatory. It was a course most dare not tread which make the acts by those who do all the more conspicuous. Any advice for showing more restraint went unheeded. Mr Jan has lived dangerously in a country that is known for its overly sensitive custodians and very tough conditions for journalists. There is a promise, however, in the calls for getting to the bottom of the matter. The demand for the truth and for exposing those who harass the media are growing more incessant with each incident, and seem to have a greater purpose and vigour about them. There is no running away from the job of digging up new information. The task is easier to undertake when efforts by individual journalists are backed by unity in the ranks of all media personnel.

Enduring grace

WITH the passing of Sister Ruth Lewis, who succumbed to complications caused by Covid-19 on Monday, our country has lost yet another luminary to this unrelenting pandemic. The loss of the septuagenarian nun is all the more acute for some of Karachi's most marginalised, the community of people with disabilities for whom Darul Sukoon represents a sanctuary from a cruel and unwelcoming world. Since it was founded 51 years ago by the sisters of the Franciscan Missionaries of Christ the King, Sister Ruth had dedicated her life to the centre's mission to provide refuge to and uplift the lives of children and the elderly abandoned by family and society alike. To generations of children with disabilities, she was a mother figure. Even in her final days, Sister Ruth tended to their needs with selflessness and compassion, caring for the 21 children who have been quarantined with Covid-19 until she herself tested positive for the virus earlier this month.

In announcing her tragic demise, the centre acknowledged the Sindh government's support in not only covering Sister Ruth's hospitalisation expenses, but also providing Darul Sukoon with funds, supplies and assistance to set up a quarantine facility on the premises — as it should. Where public services are lacking, our governments have an obligation to support the private initiatives that are filling the void. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are all dependent on each other, even on those whose humanity we rarely tend to acknowledge. Then there are those few who, like Sister Ruth, always knew this fact, and who thus toil

without consideration for recognition or remuneration in service of the most vulnerable. We must do better to model our society and state along their examples, and never take for granted the sacrifices of those who rushed to the front lines, as well as those who were always there. Sister Ruth represented the finest among us. The whole nation owes her a huge debt of gratitude.

Sleeper cells active again?

THE existence of sleeper cells is often the caveat to declarations about militancy having been eradicated. That is especially the case in a complex urban scenario where violent extremism has spread its tentacles deep within society. Recent developments in Karachi appear to illustrate this phenomenon. On Wednesday, Sindh Police's Counter Terrorism Department claimed it had arrested five men suspected of having links with the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, a sectarian outfit responsible for having murdered thousands of Shias across the country. These individuals, according to the CTD, have revealed that four teams of hitmen had become active on the directions of two incarcerated LJ leaders who had told them to target religious personalities and policemen. The detainees themselves are said to have 'confessed' to the murder of six people. A list of potential targets has allegedly also been recovered from them.

After a considerable period of relative calm, Karachi's crime graph of late has shown an uptick in targeted killings, with policemen comprising the majority of victims. At least four cops have been attacked this month in separate incidents, with three of them losing their lives as a result; the most recent incident occurred yesterday when an ASI was killed in the Lines Area. While law-enforcement agencies have yet to definitively link these murders to the alleged confession of the men they have apprehended, the implications are ominous. The LJ is among the most dangerous extremist groups ever to have existed in Pakistan. Not only is it virulently sectarian, it has also at times joined hands with global terrorist organisations, at first Al Qaeda and later — through its 'international' chapter — the militant Islamic State group, to carry out horrific, high-casualty attacks. The LJ's shadowy nature and its tendency to operate through splinter groups makes it more difficult to trace. Law enforcement

must be on its toes to ensure that this outfit does not find a conducive environment to once again become the hydra-headed monster it was.

The claim about LJ leaders having issued orders from behind bars to their foot soldiers on the outside is a plausible one. While security features have been enhanced in Karachi's Central Jail, the main chink in the armour is not the infrastructure but the ill-paid human resource. Prison personnel have been known to smuggle in mobile phones and SIMs to the inmates; in the past, raids on prison barracks have turned up shocking amounts of such contraband. In June 2017, two high-profile LJ militants — one of whom had committed nearly 60 murders — escaped from Karachi Central Jail. A subsequent investigation determined that over a dozen prison officials had "abetted and facilitated" the jailbreak. Unearthing sleeper cells requires a revival of the old 'beat' system and the community policing model. Interaction between law enforcement and society at the grassroots is vital to nip this threat in the bud.

NFC change

THE new notification issued by the PTI government changing the composition of the 10th National Finance Commission and tailoring the language of its terms of reference is but a clever attempt to tackle legal challenges without retreating on the centre's demand for the provinces to share the burden of federal expenditure. The new notification removes the prime minister's adviser on finance and the federal finance secretary from the NFC to meet constitutional stipulations in anticipation of an adverse ruling by the Islamabad High Court in a case filed by the PML-N. The Balochistan High Court has already struck down these appointments and ruled against the inclusion of any agenda other than the determination of the formulae for the vertical and horizontal division of tax resources between the centre and provinces. Yet the former appears determined to pursue its aim of getting the federating units to chip in with significant amounts from their existing divisible tax pool share under the seventh NFC award to pay federal bills — even if such a demand violates constitutional provisions. In doing so, the centre has again exposed itself to fresh judicial scrutiny because the commission is constitutionally mandated to deliberate

only on the division of financial resources and not on sharing expenditure. Thus, it may further delay deliberations on the new NFC award.

Since its inception, the PTI government has seldom tried to conceal its aversion to the administrative and financial autonomy given to the provinces under the landmark 18th Amendment and the seventh NFC award. It comes as no surprise if it attempts to somehow clip provincial powers and slash provincial shares from the divisible pool. Earlier this month, the party had helped a move in the Senate to amend the constitutional provision (introduced under the 18th Amendment) that protects existing provincial shares from the divisible pool under the seventh award and bars the centre from reducing it in future. The proposed bill was rejected by the opposition. Given that none of the provinces, including those ruled by the PTI, are in favour of a reduction in their share, the centre is unlikely to achieve its objective at the NFC forum. A better way would be to implement tax administration and policy reforms for increasing the size of the pie. For the interim, it should discuss its financial troubles and debt payments with the provinces at the CCI platform instead of using the back door to ambush them.

Bangladesh phone call

PAKISTAN-Bangladesh relations have been going through a decidedly cool phase, particularly since Sheikh Hasina Wajed began her second term as prime minister in 2009. Perhaps the biggest irritant has been the 'war crimes' tribunal set up by the Bangladeshi leader to re-examine the events of 1971. However, the ice appears to have been broken as Prime Minister Imran Khan made his first call to Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday, calling for improved ties between both South Asian states. "Pakistan is committed to deepening fraternal relations with Bangladesh," Mr Khan told his counterpart, adding that there needed to be regular bilateral and people-to-people exchanges.

Compared to the acrimony of the recent past, the prime minister's move to improve ties with Dhaka should be lauded. While the events of 1971 continue to cast a shadow over the relationship, there is a need to move forward in a spirit of conciliation and friendship. Despite the tragic events

that led to the loss of this country's eastern wing, both Pakistan and Bangladesh share a common history and many aspects of culture. There is a need to come to terms with the past, and look to a better future for the people of both countries. There are hostile regional elements that will not want to see cordial ties between Islamabad and Dhaka. But vitriol and propaganda perpetrated by those who seek to play the hegemon in South Asia should not be allowed to thwart any attempt at strengthening ties. Efforts to improve relations with neighbouring and regional states requires countries to look to the future and put behind them painful memories. Instead of summoning the demons of the past, let Islamabad and Dhaka work together to bring peace, prosperity and progress to their people and all of South Asia. This can only happen when both sides work on a relationship of trust and respect, and ignore the mischievous efforts of third parties to derail ties. Mr Khan's olive branch should not be given short shrift.

Regulating real estate

THE federal government's decision to set up the Real Estate Regulatory Authority is expected to deliver effective and fair regulations in the country's fragmented, undocumented real estate market. Prime Minister Imran Khan's directive for the creation of the proposed authority has reinforced hopes that his government is serious about regulating the informal real estate market in order to realise its true potential and boost economic growth. The development of a robust regulatory framework is crucial to creating an enabling environment for a vibrant, secure and reliable real estate market, and the proposed regulator is vital to its smooth implementation. The success of the government's fiscal and monetary incentives for the construction industry largely hinges on the early implementation of a transparent regulatory framework. The growth of a healthy mortgage industry is also linked to the enforcement of a clear regulatory framework to mitigate risks to creditors.

Pakistan's real estate market largely operates in the informal economy and is plagued with numerous issues owing to the absence of an effective regulatory framework that could protect the interests of all stakeholders — buyers, sellers, developers, builders, tenants, etc. The lack of regulations

often draws the stakeholders into long court battles over property frauds and ownership/tenancy disputes, repels potential investors because of unclear land titles and undermines public confidence in real estate. More important, tax revenue collected from this sector remains far below its true potential because over the past few decades real estate/property has become a haven for tax evaders to park huge amounts of illegal money. In recent years, the government has taken several measures to regulate the real estate market in order to document it and increase tax revenues. However, these steps have met with limited to no success owing to the absence of a coordinated effort, and a non-existent regulatory and policy framework to streamline the market.

So far the scope and coverage of the proposed authority remains unclear. Nevertheless, it is expected to introduce the country's real estate market to international best practices so that it can realise its untapped potential. In addition to streamlining, harmonising and modernising tedious processes and laws related to land and property development, it will be required to enrol builders, developers and real estate agents to properly document them so that it can swiftly find a remedy to their problems, as well as to protect the rights of consumers and tenants. The new body will be expected to work closely with all stakeholders and act as a bridge between the government and private sector in order to formulate policies and develop strategies to bolster the real estate market by removing impediments. Once the government has delivered a transparent investment ecosystem and a real estate market regulated by an efficient body, it will not be difficult for it to attract much-needed foreign investors to this sector.

Banning online apps

THE season of moral policing and censorship is yet again upon us. In a fresh move to clamp down on digital platforms, the PTA has banned video-streaming app Bigo and issued a final notice to short video app TikTok for allegedly encouraging “immoral, obscene and vulgar content”. (A ban on the online game PUBG has just been lifted by the court.) The regulator has said that despite communicating its reservations to both companies, it was not satisfied with their responses. Therefore, it said, PTA had decided to

immediately block Bigo and issue a final warning to TikTok “to control obscenity, vulgarity and immorality” on its app. Worryingly, the Supreme Court has separately taken notice of ‘objectionable’ content on YouTube. The court regretted that people using the social media platform “incite people against the judiciary, the armed forces and the government” adding that “we are showing restraint but this has to come to an end”. The objections appear to have sparked fears that YouTube may be blocked in the country — as in 2012 when the platform was banned for four years.

PTA’s message that content on these platforms is “vulgar and obscene” is ambiguous. While there is no doubt that online content which falls under the category of death threats, hate speech and sexual violence must be reported and taken up with these platforms, the regulator’s reasoning that these channels feature material that “have a negative effect on society” is vague and reeks of moral policing. What are the regulator’s specific concerns? If they are about child pornography and explicit videos of minors, it must communicate this to the company. TikTok maintains that it has deleted 3.7m videos from Pakistan for violating its community guidelines in a crackdown against content featuring nudity or sexual activity. If the company appears to be open to taking action against content which is deemed criminal, the government must engage with these platforms so that concerns can be communicated effectively. As the Digital Rights Foundation put it, the justification of such bans to ‘protect’ children is akin to banning highways to prevent road accidents. Similarly, any move to ban a platform like YouTube, too, would be counterproductive; the earlier ban severely hurt content creators who later flourished by monetising their content. The state must not dictate morality to the people, especially when these apps are avenues for learning, income generation and creative expression by young people who are devoid of entertainment and opportunities.

Nuclear security

THE issue of security of nuclear facilities is a very sensitive one, and countries need to constantly upgrade their protocols to ensure fool-proof measures are in place to protect sites. There is reassuring news where Pakistan’s atomic facilities are concerned, as a recent American study has

rated this country's protocols favourably. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, which conducted the study, Pakistan has improved the most in nuclear security and in fact overall, this country is ahead of India in the rankings. The study says that Pakistan "improved its overall score by adopting new on-site protection and cybersecurity regulations, improving insider threat protection measures and more". This analysis from an independent concern should put to rest any irresponsible conjecture that questions the safety protocols of Pakistan's nuclear programme. Moreover, on a visit to Karachi in 2018, then IAEA head Yukiya Amano had said that the metropolis's nuclear plants were "heavily protected" and that Pakistan was "committed to nuclear safety".

While the US body has praised Pakistan's progress on nuclear security, it has also sounded the alarm regarding the "decline in the rate of improvement to national regulatory structures and the global nuclear security architecture". Basically, the institute is worried that geopolitical friction and the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic was weakening global cooperation in the realm of nuclear security. Perhaps this should serve as a moment to ponder the future of atomic power, both for energy and weapons, for the global community. The risks associated with nuclear energy are far too great, compared to its advantages, and the world should think about shifting to safer, more environment-friendly alternatives. Japan's Fukushima disaster of 2011 serves as a reminder of what can go wrong at even the best protected sites should a natural disaster strike. Moreover, when some states insist on being exclusive members of the nuclear club, this causes others — with legitimate security concerns — to proliferate to protect themselves. Perhaps in the best interest of mankind, it would be better to rethink nuclear power.

PTV's role

THE government has deferred a decision to increase the licence fee of PTV from Rs35 to Rs100 per month. While this is a sensible move for now, possibly under pressure from the public outcry, the decision to do so could be taken in the near future. PTV has been groaning under financial pressure for years and despite tall claims, no government has really been able to turn the organisation around. It is a sad fact that time and again the

taxpayer has had to shoulder the burden of mismanagement and cronyism that have been part of PTV under successive governments. Increasing the licence fee today amounts to punishing the citizens for mistakes of the government.

Charging citizens a licence fee can be justified if the former get value for their money from a broadcaster. However for this to happen, a fundamental shift in the thinking of the Pakistani state has to take place with regard to PTV. Governments call PTV a 'state broadcaster'. This is wrong. It is supposed to be a 'public broadcaster' because it is meant to serve the public and not be a mouthpiece for the state or government of the day. The failure to understand the role of a taxpayer-funded TV channel is the core reason why governments have failed to build PTV as a credible organisation producing content that is aimed at the public good. No government, unfortunately, has been able to break out of its myopia and grasp the enormous potential that lies hidden inside PTV. This potential can only be unleashed if it is transformed into a public broadcaster whose financial viability is subsumed in its core role of serving the public with content that puts citizens ahead of the advertiser. Every prime minister has expressed his or her desire to turn PTV into a 'BBC model' but none has had the breadth of vision to understand what this entails. As a consequence, PTV continues to be treated as a platform for crude, low-quality propaganda peddled by insecure governments and executed by bureaucrats and professionals who measure the value of public broadcasting through its balance sheets alone.

PTV has been a tragedy unfolding over the decades in slow motion. The PTI government at the centre, for all its tall rhetoric, has stooped to the same low level of thinking about PTV that was displayed by the PPP and PML-N governments. PTV today suffers not from a bankruptcy of revenue but a bankruptcy of vision. In an age of media transformation, PTV is fast becoming a dinosaur. The only thing that can save it is if someone can truly reimagine its ethos, role and potential for the years ahead. Throwing good money after bad — which is what the increase in licence fee amounts to — makes no sense. But then not much does when it comes to PTV.

Another package

EVERY 'Balochistan development package' proposed by successive federal governments that has come to naught has only increased the sense of alienation among the Baloch. Such declarations appear to them to be no more than an exercise periodically indulged in to give lip service to addressing the province's deprivation. In 2009, for instance, the PPP government announced the Aghaz-i-Haqooq-i-Balochistan package with great fanfare; that sank without a trace. In 2017, a few months before the general election, then prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi declared an economic package for the province which died a natural death with the polls. On Friday, during a meeting of the National Development Council, Prime Minister Imran Khan set up a three-member committee to prioritise areas where development should be undertaken in Balochistan, with a focus on communications, agriculture, energy and other important sectors. At the meeting, it was also decided to set up the Balochistan Mineral Company to enhance exploration of mineral resources in the province. Can this initiative succeed where so many others have failed? Has there been any introspection within the state apparatus that has brought some understanding of our hitherto ruinous policy towards Balochistan?

After decades of broken promises, political engineering and enforced disappearances, the trust deficit between the centre and the Baloch is vast. Yet it is not, one hopes, unbridgeable. The majority of them yearn to live in peace and dignity, with the space to exercise the autonomy that is their right under the 18th Amendment. One of their fundamental grievances is that Balochistan has been deprived of its fair share in the mineral wealth that lies beneath its land, and that it is exploited as a colony rather than treated as an equal member of the federation. The province has indeed long been viewed through a narrow securitised lens, with its people's legitimate expectations being made to take a back seat to national geostrategic concerns. Such an environment has provided fertile ground for regional powers to make mischief and foment rebellion. While the ongoing insurgency has been simmering since nearly a decade and a half, recent attacks carried out by banned Baloch separatist outfits indicate they can still draw new recruits to their cause. These groups are also manifesting a shift towards a more lethal modus operandi. To neutralise

them ironically requires not a security-centric but a political solution, one rooted in a rights-based approach that prioritises the aspirations of the Baloch.

S-China spat

THE war of words and actions between the US and China has been escalating over the past few days, raising eyebrows across the globe, with mounting concerns over the possibility of a more serious confrontation between the world's top two economies. While even before coming to power President Donald Trump — guided by his 'America first' mantra — had been talking about getting 'tough' on China, now that re-election looms in November, he may be looking to deliver on that promise. Earlier last week, the US ordered the closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston over allegations of "economic espionage"; Beijing replied in kind by asking America to shut its consulate in Chengdu while calling the allegations "malicious slander". Moreover, on a recent trip to Europe, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo railed against the People's Republic with the ideological zeal of a cold warrior, asking "every nation ... to understand this threat being posed by the Chinese Communist Party". Before these developments, Mr Trump had called Covid-19 the "Chinese virus" while accusing China of "extinguishing Hong Kong's freedom" after Beijing applied a new security law in the region.

It needs to be asked why the US is ramping up its anti-China rhetoric in the final months of Mr Trump's term. It appears that the US leader is pillorying a foreign bogeyman to grab more votes, considering his flagging ratings at home. But while playing the patriotism card and lambasting China may grab him a few percentage points, the long-term impact of this brinkmanship will be negative. When rhetoric is raised to a fever pitch, the probability of unintended, and unwanted, consequences increases manifold. Moreover, while there may be legitimate questions about China's human rights record, the US chooses to be selective in this regard — hectoring opponents, and looking the other way when allied strongmen abuse rights. Instead of picking an ugly public fight with China at a time of global tension, the US should use more discreet channels to communicate its genuine concerns to Beijing.

Terrorists in Afghanistan

A NEW report recently prepared for the UN Security Council confirms what Pakistan has been saying for years: that ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan are being used by terrorists to destabilise this country. As per the report, between 6,000 to 6,500 anti-Pakistan militants are based in Afghanistan, mostly linked to the banned TTP. In fact, many of these TTP fighters have joined forces with the self-styled Islamic State's Khorasan 'chapter', which operates out of Afghanistan. Clearly, this shows that if the Afghan imbroglio is left unaddressed, a new, ferocious threat will emerge from the chaos to threaten not only Pakistan, but also the security of the entire region. As the UN report points out, the aforementioned militants are working on an agenda that is designed to use Afghanistan as "a base for spreading terrorist influence across the wider region".

To understand the threat the presence of these militants in Afghanistan poses, the role of both the TTP and IS must be examined. From 2007 onwards, the TTP unleashed a reign of terror in this country that included bombings, assassinations and other acts of mass casualty violence. The worst point in this grim campaign was the atrocious APS massacre of schoolchildren in 2014. It took multiple military operations, including Zarb-i-Azb and Raddul Fasaad, to check the advance of the TTP and like-minded terrorist groups. On the other hand, the fanatical violence of IS is well known, as the self-proclaimed 'caliphate' spread havoc across large swathes of the Middle East, specifically Iraq and Syria, while 'chapters' and sympathisers sprung up across the world. While IS may have been beaten back in its Middle East bastions, it has sought sanctuary in other ungoverned spaces in the world, with Afghanistan being one of its prime choices, thanks to the chaos in that country. Therefore, if these two bloodthirsty outfits — the TTP and IS — should join forces, much turbulence can be expected in the region. While the TTP know South Asia well, IS bring plenty of 'experience' from their bloodcurdling exploits in the Arab world. Therefore, neutralising the threat in Afghanistan should be a key priority for all regional players.

To ensure that a TTP-IS combine does not transform into an uncontrollable monster in Afghanistan, there is no other option but to push the peace process forward in that country. The gulf between the government in Kabul

and the Afghan Taliban is quite wide. However, both players must realise that should the TTP and other foreign militants establish themselves in the country, Afghanistan will plunge further into chaos, while security threats for the region will be amplified manifold. If the Afghan Taliban decide to wait for the Americans to leave in order to make a move on Kabul, the TTP and IS will surely take advantage of this and try to consolidate themselves — a scenario which must be avoided at all costs.

Unprepared for locusts

WITH all eyes on the coronavirus outbreak, little has been done to deal with another emergency — the locust plague — which has been threatening the nation's food security and the livelihoods of millions of farmers for over a year now. In spite of the warnings issued by the Food and Agriculture Organisation, as well as repeated calls for help from the farmers ever since the crop-eating pests entered Pakistan via Iran in summer last year, the government has done little to control the infestation. Farmers have mostly been left to their own devices to tackle the swarms using conventional means. The government quite belatedly declared a locust emergency in February this year. Nonetheless, no effective measures have been implemented to destroy the infestations. The decision to push the Plant Protection Department into the background and assign the responsibility of tackling the menace to the National Disaster Management Authority hasn't helped either. It has actually led to delays in the decision-making process. For example, the government has only recently decided to purchase new dusters for aerial pesticide spray. Now it plans to lease aircraft for aerial spray as the new dusters will take a few months to reach the country.

Sindh has once again asked the federal government — plant protection is a federal subject — to provide it with 100 vehicles and aircraft it had committed for combating the locusts in the province before the new generation of insects matures and finds its way here in the coming days and weeks. However, chances of any help reaching Sindh soon appear thin given the federal authorities' past record. Indeed, the plague had caught the government unprepared as the current locust attack is the worst in 30 years. But the government cannot use this pretext as an excuse for

its slow response to the scourge. It has had enough time to get ready for the battle, not just for the current round but also for the future. The fast-changing climate is feared to increase the frequency of locust invasions at the cost of food security and livelihoods. While the coronavirus appears to be retreating at the moment — at least for now — the maturing pests in Sindh's deserts are growing wings for a fresh assault on green fields and the livelihoods of poor farmers. Imagine what will happen if local locust infestations are joined by the swarms expected to reach here from the Horn of Africa in the next week or so.

Pakistan-England series

WHEN the Pakistan cricket team takes the field against England for the first of three Test matches at Old Trafford in Manchester on Aug 5, they will be up against a most unique challenge at a pivotal point in time where the game will have to adapt to changing conditions once again. Cricket, like all else, has been affected by the coronavirus, and Pakistan, like host England as well as the West Indies, will be compelled to make alterations in the ongoing series, which promises to be an exciting one. Of course, playing in empty stadiums is painful enough for the cricketers who thrive on loud cheers and thunderous applause from packed crowds. Coupled with that, there is now a ban on players using saliva on the ball to shine it, a practice as old as the game itself. Besides, the teams have to quarantine themselves for a fortnight before the matches, and are housed in hotels inside the grounds with restrictions on their movements. Regular medications, too, are mandatory for the players for as long as the tour lasts. In a nutshell, Pakistan will be tackling two fronts simultaneously; a formidable England side and new environmental norms.

Perhaps Pakistan should take heart from the fact that they are a young, enthusiastic side, and have prepared well for the stiff challenge ahead. Since arriving in England about a month in advance to observe Covid-19 precautions, the Pakistan players are by now well acclimatised and have had competitive workouts in the nets as well as in the intra-squad practice games. Pakistan players have plenty to learn from the way the West Indies have fared in their series against England. Winning the first Test quite handsomely, the West Indies have been unable to sustain their act while

England have quickly found their feet to turn the tables on them. The Pakistan team need to guard against complacency and select their best-playing, fittest 11 in every game to keep their impressive record against England intact.

A controversial law

THE Punjab Assembly has upped the ante on stifling intellectual freedom in an environment where the cultural and political space is becoming increasingly securitised. Last Wednesday, on the pretext of protecting religion — an ever-convenient ruse to ensure maximum participation and minimal resistance — the provincial legislators passed the Punjab Tahaffuz-i-Bunyad-i-Islam Bill 2020. The law makes the publication of objectionable material punishable by five years maximum in prison and up to Rs500,000 fine. Several stipulations within it, such as those pertaining to derogatory remarks against holy personages and hate speech, are already covered by existing legislation. For instance, Section 298-A of the PPC pertains to “derogatory remarks against holy personages ... either spoken or written”, including Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), his family or his companions. Similarly, Section 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Act prohibits acts intended or likely to stir up sectarian hatred through “threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour” including publication and distribution of such material. Some aspects of the new law are clearly aimed at pandering to the ultra-right lobby; others underscore the ‘otherisation’ of certain persecuted religious minorities — and thereby further fuel hatred against them.

The new law can justifiably be criticised for being superfluous and capable of stoking more religious intolerance, which this country can well do without. That said, the most alarming aspect of it is the manner in which it is to be implemented. The law provides for a director general of public relations of the Punjab government to function as a one-stop shop through which all books printed, reprinted and reproduced in the province will be vetted — a censorship central as it were. All publishers are bound to submit to the DGPR four copies of every edition of each title they print. And the DGPR has been empowered to inspect printing presses, bookstores and publishing houses; he can confiscate books before or after

they are printed if they, in his assessment, contain 'objectionable' content. Such sweeping powers conjure up images of the most repressive eras in history when knowledge was treated as inherently subversive and the right to freedom of expression had yet to find universal acceptance.

It was at such a time in 1644 that the celebrated poet John Milton in protest against censorship in England had written in the *Areopagitica*: "And what do they tell us vainly of new opinions, when this very opinion of theirs, that none must be heard but whom they like, is the worst and newest opinion of all others, and is the chief cause why sects and schisms do so much abound..." There has been an outcry from civil society, and even from within the PTI government, against the passage of the law. One hopes better sense will prevail, for there lie within this piece of legislation the seeds of grievous, long-term harm to society.

Monsoon challenge

OVER a two-day period, on Sunday and Monday, the people of Karachi went through another hellish rain-related experience. Again, a few millimetres of precipitation were enough to bring the metropolis of millions to a grinding halt. There were electrocution-related deaths, roads were submerged and therefore impassable, while there was no electricity for hours in many city areas.

Perhaps in some other country there would be outrage over such a sad state of affairs in a nation's commercial capital. But in Karachi, it's business as usual. As expected, the city's political players were busy slinging mud at each other, rather than coming up with solid ways to end this torturous yearly punishment meted out to Karachi's citizens.

Flooded roads, power outages and traffic jams: Heavy rain wreaks havoc in Karachi

However, the Sindh government's response was particularly insensitive, considering that the PPP-led provincial administration has been micromanaging Karachi and other urban areas of Sindh by taking over nearly all municipal functions.

Local Government Minister Nasir Shah first tried to attribute the chaos to a “natural calamity”, while adding that things “could have been worse”. Moreover, the minister had the gall to say opponents of the PPP were uploading “old” pictures and videos to malign all the wonderful work the government had done. Surely, Mr Shah must be talking about a different city, for Karachi over the last few days has resembled a settlement caught in the gushing waters of a biblical flood, with no government response worth the name.

While it is true that the PPP has chipped away at all local government powers thanks to its numbers in the Sindh Assembly, it alone is not the only party to blame. The MQM, which ruled Karachi with an iron fist for decades, also did little other than make superficial moves towards giving this city a modern infrastructure, including a working drainage system.

Ironically, save for the Musharraf-era local government system, Karachi has been neglected by the PPP, which doesn’t have a major vote bank here, as well as the MQM, which has made loud noises about the rights of Karachi, but has done little to translate rhetoric into deliverable policy. Even the PTI, which won the majority of the city’s National Assembly seats, has done nothing for the metropolis.

What Karachi needs is an overhaul of its decaying infrastructure and effective local government that helps protect it from disaster. Will any of the political players that milk this city step forward and do what is needed?

A good step

THE Punjab government’s nine-day Eidul Azha lockdown is a very sensible step. Whereas the number of Covid-19 cases has been falling, it would be dangerous to believe that the threat has disappeared. The virus is still lurking, ready to strike if we let down our guard. The closure of shopping plazas and other public areas, which restricts large gatherings, is a good idea not least because it suggests that the officials in charge are willing to take note of what they had earlier missed. The ill-founded generosity of the government on the occasion of Eidul Fitr had sent virus cases soaring. But for the liberties everyone took during the relaxed holiday mood that enjoyed full official approval, a few precious lives could

have been saved and many more people could have avoided getting infected. With greater emphasis on isolation and social distancing at that critical time, we might have done even better than we claim we did.

Let us hope that the limitations on markets and other designated areas covered by the nine-day ban will help root out the virus soon and allow life to return to normal. Already, a huge price has been paid for the unavoidable circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Traders dependent on daily earnings for sustenance have, in particular, been severely hit. Many have packed up and numerous others are on the brink of bankruptcy, despite the government's boast that it had handled all this smartly. It would be impossible for anyone to object to this latest lockdown, but it could have nonetheless been managed much more efficiently and without causing panic. The government waited till the eleventh hour, instead of announcing the closure a few weeks in advance to make it easier for both sellers and buyers, who were shocked at the sudden announcement. Apart from its abruptness, given that it covered the entire province as opposed to the earlier localised lockdowns, it may make more sense to call it an 'essential' rather than 'smart' lockdown.

GB's status

THE people of Gilgit-Baltistan have for long been denied full rights as citizens of Pakistan thanks largely to the power games being played in South Asia, particularly the Kashmir dispute. In an effort not to damage Pakistan's case where the Kashmir question is concerned — GB was part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir while its people fought to free themselves from Dogra rule following Partition — the region's status has continued in limbo and the question of a complete merger with Pakistan has not been satisfactorily addressed. However, with a young, educated population clamouring for constitutional rights and representative rule, the status quo is faltering, and the state needs to come up with a workable solution that appeals to GB's people, while at the same time not compromising Pakistan's position on Kashmir.

Elections in GB were announced for August, but polls have now been pushed forward to October. Considering the political atmosphere in the

region, the question of full constitutional representation for GB is likely to be a key election issue. Various governments over the decades have come up with ‘packages’ to bring GB closer to the Pakistani mainstream, and while progress has been made, the people of this geographically stunning and geostrategic region yearn for more — namely full integration with Pakistan. Those who control GB’s destiny in Islamabad must listen to these voices and resolve the region’s issues through democratic means, instead of cracking down and imposing orders in colonial fashion. As it is, nationalist parties are gaining ground in the region and unless GB is given genuine reforms instead of lollipops, the sense of alienation amongst local people may grow. We have witnessed the follies of a rigid approach in Balochistan as well as erstwhile Fata. The region has immense potential economically where its tourism sector is concerned, as well as abundant natural resources, while it is the gateway for CPEC. With a fully representative government, the region can stand on its own with an educated population keen to develop their area. The PTI-led federal government, as well as other parties in parliament, need to come up with a bold, democratic solution for the region. For example, locals resent the fact that the unelected GB Council has more powers than the elected legislative assembly. This anomaly must be rectified while the recommendations of the Sartaj Aziz-led commission, which called for giving GB provisional provincial status, should be implemented.

Oil commission

THE government’s decision to form a commission of inquiry to identify factors that had caused severe fuel shortages around the country in June and fix the responsibility for the crisis is a good idea. The commission is being established because the prime minister isn’t satisfied with the findings of the previous inquiries into the crisis that saw transport fuels disappear from the market for almost a month. Most petrol pumps across the country dried up because of supply chain disruptions while others were forced to ration fuel as motorists queued up to fill their tanks. It is being constituted on the lines of the one set up earlier this year to investigate the winter wheat and sugar shortages and will comprise officials from anti-corruption, intelligence and regulatory bodies. It will have powers to

conduct forensic audits of the record, stock position, supply and sale of petroleum products of the entire supply chain.

The crisis began with the reduction in pump prices in May as global oil markets slumped, intensified in early June as petroleum stocks depleted, continued for one month and ended only when the single largest price increase ever was announced. In between, consumers suffered as the petroleum ministry first blamed the oil marketing companies, calling them a mafia, and later Ogra for not regulating the sector effectively, which led to a sudden eruption of the crisis and the pain experienced by motorists at the pump. Ogra was asked to investigate the shortage; it found OMCs involved in hoarding supplies and lightly penalised six firms for discontinuation and insufficient supplies at pumps. Yet the companies disregarded the directions to import new cargo to increase supplies, arguing that arranging fresh supplies at reduced domestic prices was not financially viable for them.

Unlike Pakistan, many oil-importing nations availed the opportunity arising from the crashing oil markets resulting from the pandemic-related global recession by increasing their oil reserves. But in Pakistan, domestic shortages resulted from poor governance and the petroleum ministry's indecision on imports. The government is yet to determine ToRs for the proposed commission. However, the first task for it should be to examine the ministry's capacity to predict the global oil market and domestic requirements. This is important because the ministry for unexplained reasons had ordered an embargo on oil imports in March and delayed approvals for imports when restrictions were eventually lifted in April. With the supply chain of petroleum products ranging between 45 and 60 days and sales rising by 82pc in June compared to April, the crisis was certain to surface even if domestic prices were not reduced. The ministry has also failed to ensure that OMCs maintain the mandatory oil reserves of 21 days. Pricing mechanism is another area for the commission to analyse. Unless governance issues at the petroleum ministry are resolved, such crises are likely to recur every few years.

Arrests in Egypt

IN a recent verdict, an Egyptian court sentenced five female social media influencers to two years imprisonment for, according to a state-owned website, “violating the values and principles of Egyptian society and posting indecent photos and videos disturbing to public morals”. It is clearly part of a long, ongoing clampdown against a growing number of individuals, from bloggers to artists, journalists and even doctors, under President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi’s regime — which has only escalated further since the outbreak of the pandemic. At a time when access to information and the ability to speak the truth is absolutely vital in order to save lives, doctors and pharmacists have been arrested for bringing attention to issues plaguing the country’s healthcare system, and journalists for questioning official Covid-19 figures. Last month, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation imposed far-reaching restrictions on news and social media on a range of subjects, under the guise of cracking down on ‘fake news’.

The fundamental insecurity at the heart of all authoritarian regimes is exposed through these actions — painting with a broad brush all forms of expression and speech that may undermine the state’s absolute control over its citizens as ‘harmful’, and by that very fact illegal. And all this comes at the expense of eroding, sometimes irrevocably, social harmony and cohesion. When state-sponsored abuse of freedom of expression is normalised, it emboldens all manner of social vigilantism, from moral policing of women and minority groups, to marking dissidents as ‘enemies of the state’ — often with deadly consequences. The threat to human security only increases in an environment of stifling censorship, as the lack of scrutiny provides governments cover to act with impunity. Unfortunately, there seems to be no end in sight to this era of illiberalism and draconian rule. There are parallels that can be drawn between what is taking place in Egypt and similar intolerance towards civil liberties in other states, none of which are flattering.

SAPMs' resignation

SOME resignations deserve to be celebrated. The two that were submitted to Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday do not fall in this category.

Tania Aidrus and Dr Zafar Mirza, special assistants to the prime minister working as team leads in the digital and health domains respectively, announced their resignations via social media citing reasons which may have some basis but clearly do not explain the entirety of the situation. Ms Aidrus referred to her dual nationality as a key factor in her decision while Dr Mirza pointed to the furore over the role of unelected special assistants and advisers as influencing his resignation. He also expressed disappointment at not being able to usher in reforms in the health sector that were his primary reason for accepting the job.

If these reasons are taken at face value — which can only be done partially — even then the ruling party needs to seriously review the fallout of these resignations.

It is fairly clear that neither Ms Aidrus nor Dr Mirza resigned voluntarily. If they were forced out for issues that they have publicly stated, they leave many questions unanswered. The issue of dual nationals serving in key government positions needs to be settled one way or another. The government cannot have it both ways: throwing Ms Aidrus under the bus while retaining other dual nationals as heads of ministries. Such duality will reflect adversely on the government's credibility and undercut its claims of holding on to principled positions.

In the light of these resignations, all the other SAPMs may want to reconsider their positions and make the right call. Similarly, the prime minister should also take the grumbings of his elected cabinet members against their unelected colleagues seriously. Going by the government's logic, the resignation of two key people has already delivered a blow to the myth that specialists will do a better job of running ministries. It is advisable that the prime minister strike a proper balance within the cabinet and rethink his overt partiality to unelected technocrats.

These resignations have also, yet again, exposed the groupings and turf wars inside the ruling party. If Ms Airdus fell victim to such factional fighting, it reflects poorly on the way that the government is run. It also illustrates that the system remains resistant to outside talent regardless of who sits at the top. This is a wrong message for all those who want to contribute towards reforming governance.

Prime Minister Imran Khan was the most vocal supporter of bringing in the best people from across the world to serve in official positions and make a difference. After seeing how two such persons were unceremoniously removed from their positions, most people would think twice before jumping into a system that does not welcome outside talent.

It is an unfortunate situation whichever way one looks at it.

Press Club raid

THE word ‘unprecedented’ is often used in reference to the oppressive tactics being used against the media in this country for the past couple of years. On Monday morning, the authorities breached yet another convention, with the Sindh Rangers conducting a raid on the Karachi Press Club. Upon being questioned, they declared they were conducting ‘full dress rehearsals’ in preparation for a threat alert in the ‘Red Zone’, within which the KPC is also located. No permission was sought from the press club authorities for the exercise. Why did the Sindh Rangers consider themselves entitled to barge into a location that is a hub of journalists in Karachi, indeed a symbol of the freedom of the press? Given the demonisation — not to mention abduction — of ‘recalcitrant’ journalists and the micro-management of the news agenda and its presentation by powerful forces behind the scenes, one can reasonably assume this latest provocation to be yet another attempt to bring the media to heel. Surely the Sindh Rangers would not have conducted such a ‘rehearsal’ unannounced on the premises of the elite Sind Club in the same area?

The incident is reminiscent of events on the night of Nov 8, 2018, when several gunmen in plainclothes had forcibly entered the KPC, harassed the journalists present and searched the premises. It was later claimed that the raid was carried out by CTD personnel in order to arrest a journalist for

possession of anti-state and hate literature, and that they had mistakenly ended up at the KPC — a very well-known location — due to “some problem in their GSM locator”. The individual concerned, Nasrullah Khan Chaudhry, was taken into custody the next day and subsequently sentenced to five years in jail by an anti-terrorism court. In April, the Sindh High Court acquitted him. The entire case is symptomatic of the ordeal that the media is being made to suffer, and which was once again in evidence with the Rangers’ raid. The media, or at least some less pliable sections of it, is being painted as inherently suspicious and unworthy of the protections due to it. Even during Gen Ziaul Haq’s regime, the KPC was considered out of bounds for law-enforcement personnel. It says much when the media feels more beleaguered under an ostensibly democratic system than during a military dictatorship. Ultimately, it redounds on the government that it is unable or unwilling to protect the fundamental right to freedom of expression.

Harvest of hate

PAKISTAN is plagued by lawlessness, it is often said. This perception is perhaps most heightened when extrajudicial murders are justified, or when unruly mobs attack vulnerable individuals and communities, or when the upholders of the law themselves display brazen disregard for their profession, showering rose petals on criminals. Or when houses of justice themselves become scenes of vigilantism. On Wednesday, a man accused of committing blasphemy was shot dead by his accuser during the hearing of his case at the Peshawar Judicial Complex. According to reports, the complainant asked the accused to recite some religious verses, before drawing out a gun and shooting him on the spot. The deceased was believed to have been suffering from mental health problems. While the full details of the case are yet to be ascertained, there can be no defence for taking the law into one’s own hands, whether committed in the name of religion, honour, or any other cause. Undoubtedly, many will rush to defend or laud the killer, ignoring the high and noble teachings of the religion they claim to follow, by giving in to their baser instincts.

None of this is new. The seeds of intolerance were sowed long ago, and we have been reaping its harvest, as those who claim to act out of love

only spread hatred, fear and discord through the land. In order to reverse this self-destructive trajectory, our official and unofficial leadership must not give in to apologetics, and insist on the supremacy of the law. For years, the state has failed to invest in the people's education — an education that inculcates tolerance, a sense of community and responsibility — and it has failed to protect its own people. However, elected leadership is also a reflection of the people themselves. The cycle continues. Tyrants and bullies who use the language of victimhood are placated. At this point, perhaps all we can do is pray for this country's future.