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EDITORIALS

July 2021

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Compiled By
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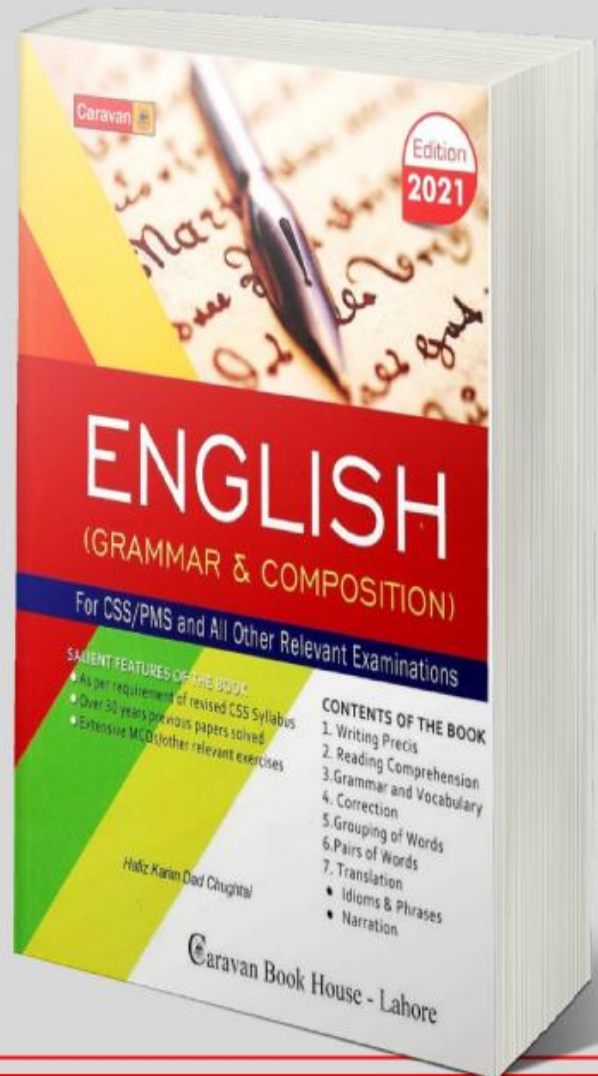
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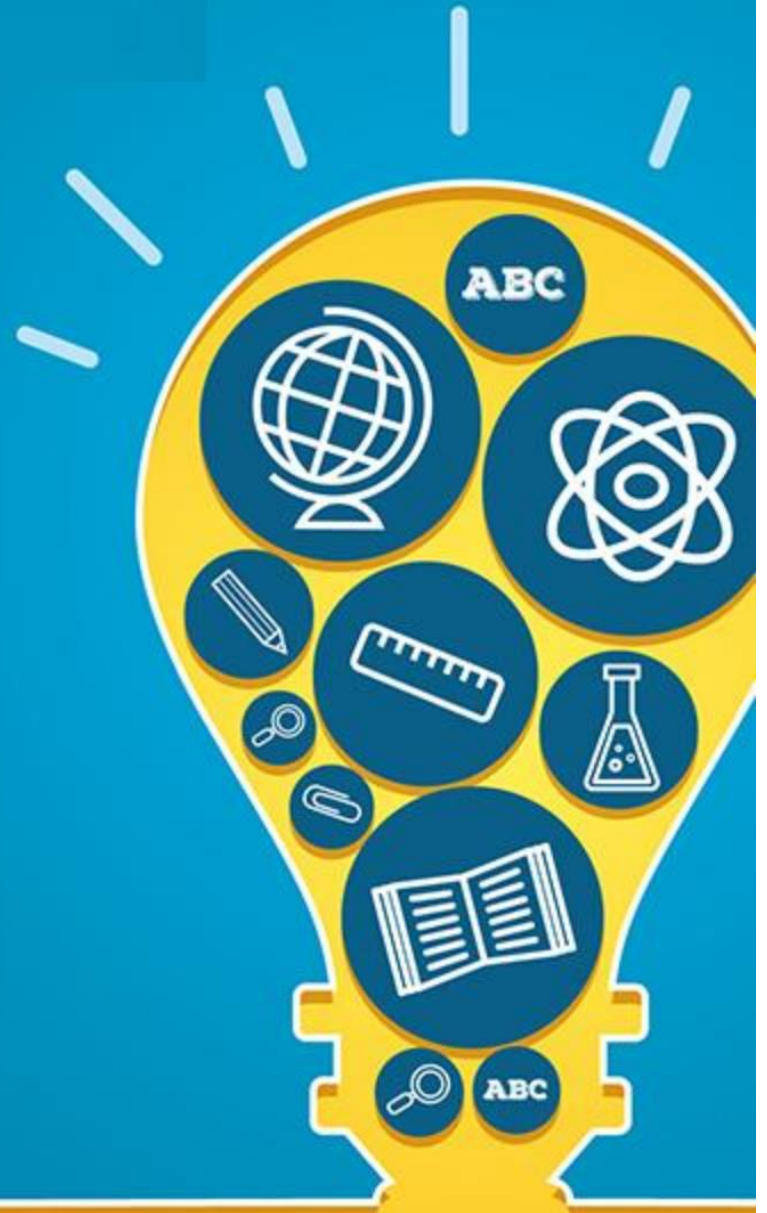
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Our foreign ties

IN the choppy waters of global politics, those states that keep national interest supreme and make deft foreign policy choices — specifically by resisting getting caught up in other people’s conflicts — are the ones that succeed. Of course, various Pakistani governments in the past have failed to adopt such measures, getting the country sucked into Cold War politics, as well as the Afghan quagmire following the Soviet invasion, for example.

Now, as another geopolitical confrontation emerges in the region, pitting the Western camp against China, Pakistan will need to make some tough choices. It is in this context that the prime minister told Chinese state broadcaster CGTN on Tuesday that Pakistan will not join any anti-Beijing grouping. Pakistan “should have good relations with everyone” Imran Khan told the Chinese outlet, while adding that the relationship between Islamabad and Beijing is “very deep”.

The “strange, great rivalry” Mr Khan referred to in the interview points to the emerging Build Back Better World (B3W) scheme that has recently been floated by the G7 bloc of industrialised Western states (and Japan). As American officials have said on record, the plan is designed to counter the Belt and Road Initiative, which CPEC is a part of.

It should be remembered that the prime minister referred to CPEC as the “biggest thing happening in Pakistan” in the aforesaid interview. Along with B3W, the US is pushing the ‘Quad’, a grouping of four states that includes India, to contain China. Considering these geopolitical developments, the prime minister’s concerns are valid, and he has rightly said that Pakistan will not abandon its friends.

The fact is that Pakistan’s relations with China are indeed long-standing, and cannot be sacrificed at the altar of expediency. Beijing has come to this country’s aid at difficult times, and Pakistan values this commitment — although a position of unqualified support to any country merits review.

Having said that, this country also wishes to have cordial ties with the US and to move beyond a transactional relationship that has existed since the Cold War. Therefore, the message to Washington must be clear: we want close relations

with you, but Pakistan will not become a party to any rivalries designed to isolate its traditional allies.

In fact, this should be the mantra to guide all foreign policy decisions. Whether it is getting involved in the Arab-Iranian dispute or other prickly foreign policy questions, Pakistan must maintain neutrality and be guided by pragmatism, principles and national interest. For example, Pakistan did the right thing by not getting involved in the Yemen imbroglio in 2015, though the decision had annoyed many of our Arab 'brothers'. At that juncture, the collective wisdom of parliament had saved Pakistan from getting trapped in another quagmire. Therefore, it should be through the democratic process that all future foreign policy questions are settled in a wise and judicious manner.

Easy budget victory

THE odds were always stacked against the opposition. Its claims to not let the PTI get its budget apart, it was always known that the government had enough numbers to smoothly manage the National Assembly's approval for its spending and tax revenue collection plans for the next fiscal year. Hence, the passage of the budget on Tuesday was not unexpected. What surprised people was the lack of effort on the part of the opposition, specifically the PML-N, the largest opposition group in the Assembly, to resist its passage. More surprising was the sudden disappearance of a large number of PML-N lawmakers from the House just when it was time to vote for or against the budget. Opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif, who had pledged to ensure that the budget would not be passed, did not turn up either. Former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi stayed away on the pretext of a hearing of a case against him. It seems from their statements justifying their absence that PML-N leaders had already conceded defeat.

Credit must be given to the PPP leadership for ensuring that 54 of the party's 56 lawmakers were present in the house when the final call for a voice vote on the resolution calling for approval of the Finance Bill was made. Even the ailing Asif Zardari, who had to attend a court hearing in the morning, made sure his vote was counted. PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari also objected to what he called the illegality of the voice vote for the Finance Bill's approval as he pressed the speaker for a headcount. Unlike the PML-N, the PPP decided not to let the

government get away with its budget without a fight. That is what the opposition is expected to do in a democracy: question the government, and hold it to account for its decisions and policies in parliament — and even outside it if need be to protect the rights of the people. The PML-N was expected to do better. But probably intra-party rifts on a forward strategy is keeping it from exerting its influence in parliament. The divisions in the combined opposition, especially the bad blood between the PPP and PML-N, are also affecting its effectiveness. It is time they set aside their differences to pursue a joint strategy on major issues that come up in parliament to question the ruling party's policies instead of allowing it carte blanche when it comes to national affairs.

Cricket venue shift

THE long-expected shifting of the Twenty20 World Cup from coronavirus-stricken India to the Middle East was finally confirmed on Tuesday. The UAE and Oman will host the showpiece event of cricket's shortest format from Oct 17 to Nov 14 this year after India's ability to hold the tournament was severely limited by a massive surge in Covid-19 cases, which also forced its lucrative Indian Premier League to be postponed and shifted to the UAE. The UAE also played host to the final 20 matches of the Pakistan Super League season, which concluded last week after being postponed in March due to virus cases.

As the pandemic raged, a number of mega-scale sporting events were shifted to this year — namely the European Football Championships and the Tokyo Olympics. Euro 2020, being played across Europe, marked the return of major events when it kicked off last month and the World Twenty20 will be the fourth sporting extravaganza to be held this year after the Olympics, which open on July 23, and South America's Copa America football tournament which is currently underway in Brazil — another country that has been ravaged by the virus. While the Euros are being held with limited spectators at venues, the Copa America is taking place behind closed doors. The International Cricket Council hasn't yet confirmed whether or not fans would be allowed in stadiums for World T20 matches. The UAE, which is among the countries with the highest vaccination rates, started welcoming live audiences to sporting events in May but the risk of coronavirus still looms large. The Delta variant of Covid-19, which wreaked havoc in India, is spreading quickly and has been a cause of concern to sports organisers around the world. There will be a biosecure bubble for teams at the

World T20 and all sorts of precautions will be taken but as the Euros and Copa America have shown, no tournament is immune from the threat of the pandemic.

PM reaches out

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan struck a conciliatory tone towards the opposition in his speech in the National Assembly on Wednesday when he requested them to cooperate in agreeing on a set of electoral reforms so that future elections could become non-controversial.

It was a rare, and a welcome, sight to see the prime minister reaching out to the opposition for a larger cause, instead of tearing into them. This refreshing tone gelled with the overall ambience of the proceedings which enabled the prime minister to labour through his lengthy speech without interruption and heckling.

The treasury and the opposition benches had reached a working understanding to allow the parliamentary proceedings to function normally after the ruckus during the budget presentation. This bodes well for the political system that appeared to be overheating dangerously.

The matter of electoral reforms requires the highest priority by parliament. The government blundered by bulldozing a bill of electoral reforms through the National Assembly and was rightly chastised by the opposition and the Election Commission of Pakistan for it. Only belatedly did the government realise, it seems, that many of the proposed reforms in the bill went contrary to constitutional requirements and could have been challenged in court. The proposals required greater debate and discussion in order for all parties to reach a consensus, and this is what the prime minister has now agreed to do.

The government is insisting on adopting electronic voting machines which the opposition looks at with suspicion. The proposal should not be dismissed without a proper debate. There may be merits to adopting this technology if it can be tailored so that there is no chance of it being hacked or manipulated. The ECP has done some work on it, and various pilot projects should be launched in order to test the machines. The opposition should approach the matter with an open mind instead of needlessly turning it into a controversy.

The government's biggest blunder these last three years has been its refusal to engage the opposition with sincerity. It has adopted a confrontational attitude

from the very start and this has led to a breakdown of a functional relationship between the two sides. If the prime minister is now ready and willing to alter this approach — as was evident in his speech — then the opposition should also reciprocate in kind.

The roots of the rivalry may go deep, but the rivals can at least sit across the table and start engaging with each other on the matter of electoral reforms. This would ensure that the final bill passed would enjoy the support of all the parties and would contribute to improving the system for the next general elections. The prime minister has taken a positive step and the opposition should reach out and accept the gesture for its sincerity.

Negative NAB impact

NAB HAS become a major drag on the economy, paralysing decision-making across all tiers of government. So when the petroleum secretary told a Senate panel that the dreaded anti-corruption watchdog had ‘dispossessed government officials of the initiative to take decisions’ and that NAB’s “brutal act” was imposing heavy costs on the economy, he was giving voice to popular sentiment. He said that NAB needed to be restrained so that the country could achieve its full potential. “Countries cannot be run like this,” he was quoted to have said in his testimony to the panel. “Investors are squirming,” he added, citing several examples where fear of action by the accountability agency has kept bureaucrats from making crucial decisions at the expense of the economy and the people. One such instance is the indecision over the utilisation of 200mmcf of spare capacity at the existing RLNG terminals, which can be utilised to generate 1,200 MW of electricity, because of fears of endless NAB inquiries. The panel agreed, indicating that the accountability body was damaging the business environment and economy.

If NAB has earned anything in its more than two decades of existence, it is the widespread mistrust of people from all segments of society. Though the agency has been mired in controversy since its early years, the uncalled for interventions by the watchdog in more recent times under its present chairman, in several spheres of life, have robbed it of whatever integrity or credibility it had — if any. Unfortunately, many now see NAB as a key obstruction in the way of the nation’s progress. It is lamentable that NAB has achieved few results in over 20 years

and its attempts to stop corruption and financial wrongdoings have been largely unsuccessful. Rather, in recent years it has been turned into a tool for political persecution of opponents of sitting governments. The eagerness with which NAB has been instituting corruption cases against opposition politicians — as well as bureaucrats and businessmen linked with them at some point or the other — to put them in jail, often on flimsy charges, illustrates the willingness of the NAB bureaucracy to toe the line of the ruling circles out to get the opposition. It is sad that the government appears reluctant to rein in NAB in spite of a broader realisation of the adverse impacts of the so-called accountability drive on the economy and the well-being of citizens.

Flight cancellations

WITH the cancellation of several international flights, travellers to and from Pakistan have been plunged into a state of uncertainty. According to the Civil Aviation Authority, no move has been made on its part to cancel the flights. The CAA maintains that passengers were inconvenienced because international carriers first overbooked flights and later had to cancel them because of the restrictions imposed by the National Command Operation Centre. One carrier confirmed that some of its flights had been cancelled to comply with the NCOC's restrictions. In May, the NCOC had announced a reduction in international travel from May 5 to May 20, allowing just 20pc of inbound air traffic from all over the world. The NCOC restriction was later extended till July 15. It appears that international carriers had released schedules and allowed passengers to book their tickets in the hope that Pakistan would ease restrictions and increase flight operations, but were forced to cancel when, instead, the restrictions were extended.

All this has added to the woes of potential travellers, who have found themselves in limbo as they scramble to find alternatives — which in some cases are not available. Aside from the costs and the inconvenience of having to rebook and reschedule plans, travellers have also endured the anguish of simply not knowing what the next step will be. Here, international carriers and the CAA can do much more to communicate, so that travellers are not left in the lurch. The CAA should have been made aware that the NCOC is extending restrictions, so that the authority could intimate international carriers about this critical update. The carriers, too, should not allow passengers to book flights if there is no clarity on

flight operations and permission to operate. Travelling during the pandemic is already an expensive and tedious ordeal, with testing before and, in many cases, after travel. Airlines and the CAA must work together to ensure the process is kept as smooth as possible, given the restrictions in place to keep the Covid-19 infection rate low.

Draconian rules

THE Asia Internet Coalition has once again struck back against Pakistan's Removal of Unlawful Online Content Rules, 2021, describing the latest version (published last month by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication) as containing all the same "problematic provisions" as previous drafts, with only "minor changes". Echoing concerns of local rights advocates and digital experts, the association of major technology firms also noted with alarm that these rules go far beyond the scope of its parent act, the draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. The rules are also currently being challenged in the Islamabad High Court on the grounds of being unconstitutional, a development which had at least led to the attorney general conceding the need for more stakeholder consultation. That was in April. Some months later, given the absence of any substantive feedback being incorporated into the rules, it is apparent that despite sustained attempts to engage with lawmakers in good faith, human rights defenders' concerns continue to fall on deaf ears, validating their worst fears regarding the state's intentions for digital governance.

The centrepiece of an explicit and relentless drive to monitor and control virtually all aspects of our lives, the rules are impractical, oppressive and guaranteed to cause immense social and economic harm. There is no imaginable outcome in which they will lead to progress and growth — rather, they are designed to afford the state even more excessive and arbitrary powers, with little to no oversight and accountability. The cost of this campaign to forcefully promote a statist monoculture will be paid for by citizens for decades to come, as every avenue for creativity and innovation is stifled. Since the rules were first floated, the government has led stakeholders down a meandering path of insincere dialogue. But unless it wishes to plunge the country into a digital dark age, there is only one course of action it must undertake: denotify the rules and commit to a comprehensive overhaul of Peca.

Security briefing

AGAINST the backdrop of uncertainty stemming from a transitioning Afghanistan, the in camera national security briefing given by the military and intelligence chiefs to legislators the other day is to be welcomed.

The chiefs spoke largely about the volatile situation in Afghanistan, though developments in India-held Kashmir and US efforts to contain China also came up. Given the implications of each of these relationships for Pakistan, it was important for those who have historically influenced foreign policy in the country to take lawmakers into confidence about the situation. Such a meeting is an opportunity for legislators to ask questions about the success of past policies and weigh in on lessons for the future. In fact, the interior minister after the meeting talked of the army's change in policy when it came to committing bases and troops to other countries — a significant change that warrants an explanation.

There are reports of a second potential security briefing, which, if held, should provide a good opportunity for lawmakers on both the opposition and treasury benches to continue this dialogue. Though Sheikh Rashid talked of the army, government and opposition being on the 'same page' on security issues, frank conversations underpinned by questions should be welcomed by the military so that the political stakeholders can make informed decisions on challenges that are bound to outlive the government of the day.

In the recent past, similar briefings have taken place on important issues such as the Gilgit-Baltistan elections and the downing of Indian jets by Pakistan in 2019. But Prime Minister Imran Khan has mostly remained absent from such briefings. This time, too, the prime minister was not at the meeting, and a controversy erupted as to why he did not attend. Though the government claims Mr Khan stayed away because opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif purportedly told the National Assembly speaker he would not attend if the prime minister were there, the PML-N has rejected the statement, and pointed out that his name was not on the list of attendees in the notification.

Ironically, the briefing, which was billed earlier as one that would mark the beginning of a 'new era of politics' in the country, has given more reason to both government and opposition lawmakers to bicker. Reports indicate that the military and security chiefs, too, addressed this 'divisive politics' and called on

lawmakers to avoid it — a statement that should serve as a warning to politicians about how their inability to communicate is giving further room to the establishment to interfere in civilian matters.

Lawmakers on both sides should demonstrate that they are able to hold civilised discussions to reach agreement on critical issues without needing reminders from the military. For too long, the security establishment has dominated the decision-making process in the country. It is only by strengthening democratic institutions and making parliament sovereign that politicians can lead the decision-making process.

CCP centenary

THE centenary of the Communist Party of China was observed with much pageantry on Thursday, with Chinese President Xi Jinping using the occasion to issue policy statements directed not only at his countrymen, but also friends and foes abroad. Much like the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic celebrated in 2019, the occasion was used to show the world how far China has come in the economic sphere, along with flexing Beijing's military muscle. There were promises from the president to learn lessons from "other cultures", but with the refrain that "sanctimonious preaching" would not be tolerated. In a more ominous tone, the Chinese leader warned that anyone trying to "bully, oppress, or subjugate" China would "have their heads bashed". Considering the growing gulf of mistrust between China and the West, particularly the US, the warning was stark. Indeed the party must be commended for transforming China from a planned economy to a capitalist juggernaut, boasting the world's second largest economy today. Of course, there were many pitfalls along the way, such as the disastrous Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and after Mao Zedong's experiments it was Deng Xioping's adherence to "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that has made China into an economic powerhouse, albeit with an authoritarian political structure. It is this legacy that Xi Jinping wants to take forward, projecting China's might globally. The Belt and Road Initiative, including CPEC, and Beijing's growing military footprint, are all part of this vision.

While China has made great strides economically under the party's watch, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty as World Bank figures show, Beijing can do

more on the human rights front. In this regard, the Xinjiang issue, particularly the matter of China's Muslim Uighur population, is a matter of particular concern. Western states have used the reported treatment of Uighurs, as well as the state's handling of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, to lambast Beijing on the human rights front. China has dismissed these concerns and it is true that many Western states are selective in expressing outrage over human rights. However, where the Xinjiang question is concerned, greater transparency is needed and in fact, respecting the cultural norms of ethnic and religious minorities will strengthen China, not weaken it. While Pakistan has accepted Beijing's version on the Uighur issue, it can, through diplomatic channels, urge China to address this issue judiciously.

Plots for evictees

IN the midst of their long and harrowing ordeal, there may be some light at the end of the tunnel for those affected by the Gujjar and Orangi nullah encroachment operations in Karachi. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah announced at a press conference on Friday that the provincial government had decided to allot 80 square yard plots to the 6,500 families displaced as a result of the massive exercise. To that end, he said that the Supreme Court would be approached to provide Rs10bn out of the funds being recovered from Bahria Town on account of the land development firm's settlement dues. Part of the money, he said, would go towards the construction of houses for the families affected by the anti-encroachment operation.

This is the first long-term solution proposed by the Sindh government to address the displacement of the evictees. Thus far, the federal government has agreed to pay two years' rent to the affected families at the rate of Rs15,000 per month and, later, resettlement under the Naya Pakistan Housing Scheme. However, given this scheme is in a nascent stage, resettlement under it would be a very distant prospect. In any case, it is the provincial government's responsibility to undertake this exercise, just as it was its responsibility in the first place to provide these families with affordable housing on a legally sound basis which would have prevented their homes from being reduced to rubble today. Instead, expediency drove local authorities decades ago to issue leases and NOCs for the provision of utilities for the residents in these areas. Anti-encroachment drives along Gujjar nullah have been initiated many a time: in 2016, more than 4,000 structures were

reportedly razed to the ground along a 24km stretch of the waterway. Last year's catastrophic urban flooding after a prolonged spell of monsoon rains, however, brought matters to a head, and this time the Supreme Court seems determined that the authorities see the nullahs cleared of encroachments. In most evictions that have taken place in Karachi's history, promises made to the affected people have not been fulfilled in their entirety. For instance, only 30,000 of the 80,000 displaced due to the Lyari Expressway construction were resettled, and a mere 33pc received even the meagre compensation — Rs50,000 — that was announced. This time, the apex court must ensure the Sindh government fulfils its obligations within a reasonable amount of time to those rendered homeless by the operation.

Bagram exit

THE exit of American and Nato troops from Afghanistan's Bagram airbase which was completed on Friday, signals the end of an era, one that saw another failed attempt by Western states at nation-building and the 'airlifting' of democracy.

Bagram served as a grim example of how the West, particularly the US, set up notorious 'black sites' — under the garb of the 'war on terror' — that were practically gulags where the fundamental rights of prisoners were trampled on freely. Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba are other members of this unenviable list.

Once a modest Cold War airfield, Bagram was transformed into a sprawling fortress that projected American military power in the aftermath of 9/11 many thousands of miles from the US homeland. But today, now that the Americans and their allies have quit Bagram, it is fair to ask: has their 'mission' been accomplished? With the clouds of uncertainty swirling around Afghanistan's future following the exit of foreign forces, the answer is clearly in the negative.

The fact is that the involvement of foreign forces in Afghanistan — first the Soviets in 1979 and later the Americans and their Nato cohorts — has only prolonged the Afghan nightmare. While Afghan political forces and warlords are no doubt also to blame for the dysfunction that haunts their land, the interference of foreign powers and the playing of geopolitical games on Afghan soil have had a major part in destabilising the country, and preventing an organic evolution and political process from taking root. Though it can be argued that Afghanistan has

rarely seen stability, perhaps the script would have been written differently if the USSR and later the US had not meddled in the country over the last four decades and counting.

Looking ahead, there are far too many unknowns where Afghanistan is concerned. As a Western diplomat based in Kabul told Reuters news agency recently, the US and Nato have “won many battles, but have lost the Afghan war”. This is quite clear, as the Afghan Taliban, emboldened by a series of victories, have their eyes set on Kabul. The Western-supported Afghan government seems unable to defend the country, particularly without the military muscle of its foreign protectors.

While Joe Biden has talked of “over the horizon capacity” to defend the Afghan government, he has also said in the same breath that the “Afghans are going to have to ... do it themselves”. The message seems clear: Kabul is on its own.

Of course, an ‘Islamic emirate of Afghanistan’ is not a palatable option, not for the world, and not for Pakistan, as this country’s senior civil and military leaders have indicated. If Afghanistan implodes again, very real concerns of terrorism and refugees will confront the world community, particularly its neighbours. For now, there are too many unanswered questions about Afghanistan, and no convincing answers.

Poor vaccine response

PAKISTAN has one of the lowest Covid-19 vaccination rates in the world — a situation which, if not improved, can lead to multiple challenges. Thus far, only 5pc of our entire population has been vaccinated. Even if one were to look at the percentage of vaccinated people in the eligible group, the figure is a sorry 10pc. Though the data shows vaccine coverage in Islamabad is promising at 35pc, inoculation of eligible members of the population in Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab is 10pc or lower.

Experts have said that vaccine hesitancy, conspiracy theories and low awareness are major factors behind the slow vaccination rate. But the Ministry of National Health Services claims otherwise, saying that the rates are low as most people want to get vaccinated near their place of residence and are deterred by long wait times. While this may be a minor factor behind the slow pace, the issue

of vaccine hesitancy is a real and dangerous one. One survey cited by doctors has revealed that there are fears about getting sick from the jab and concerns that it will alter one's DNA. The government must acknowledge how real and widespread the issue of vaccine scepticism is, and then address it with a systematic and effective awareness campaign. Failure to do so will end in a Covid-19 disaster for Pakistan — something we have fortunately avoided thus far. Experts have described a situation in which the “world is sitting on a time bomb” as the Delta variant is spreading and has mutated into the Delta Plus. There are fears of the next mutation becoming an ‘immune escape virus’, which the human body will no longer be able to recognise and eliminate. Areas with low vaccination rates could likely be the birthplace of the next variant, as the virus will thrive among swathes of unvaccinated people. The government must address this hesitancy and ramp up efforts to persuade people to get vaccinated, or risk a healthcare crisis and a population cut off from the world due to curbs on travel.

Food-insecure nation

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan was spot on when last week he termed food insecurity as the biggest challenge facing Pakistan, adding that it would become an ‘issue of national security’ if drastic measures were not taken to boost agriculture. With population growing rapidly and poverty increasing even faster, food insecurity has become a major issue, with a very large portion of the population already food-insecure. Pakistan was ranked 80th on the Global Food Security Index of 2020 out of 113 countries as it lagged behind almost all South Asian nations barring Bangladesh, and several African countries. This means that Pakistan scored extremely poorly on all indicators or drivers of food insecurity — from food availability, affordability, quality and safety to natural resources and resilience — considered by the GFSI for ranking nations on the index. The Global Hunger Index, which takes into account the proportion of the malnourished population, frequency of child mortality, stunted growth, and height to weight ratios of children, placed Pakistan at 88th position out of 132 countries it surveyed last year.

Pakistan's poor food security and hunger rankings underline the gravity of the situation and call for urgent action. A large portion of the population is food-insecure or malnourished not just because food is scarce but also because various other socioeconomic factors keep people from accessing nutritious and

healthy food. According to the World Food Programme, nearly 43pc of Pakistanis are food-insecure. Of this number, 18pc of people severely lack access to food. This is linked to the fact that most of these people are heavily dependent on agriculture for a living. That means that food security is inextricably linked to overall government policies meant to alleviate poverty, increase domestic agricultural productivity, curb price inflation and ensure safety of food with regard to agricultural productivity. Thus, improvements in the availability of food are not enough to end hunger and malnutrition; it is equally, if not more, important to ensure that people can access healthy and safe meals if there is to be universal food security and if the widespread problem of stunting and wasting among children is to be addressed. Indeed, Pakistan has a long way to go before it can fully address the issue of food insecurity and hunger. But it can start moving in that direction by tweaking its policies that directly or indirectly impact the ability of the poor to access nutritious meals.

Swelling import bill

PAKISTAN'S trade deficit expanded by almost 33pc to \$30.8bn during the last fiscal from \$23.2bn a year before because of a hefty growth in imports. The country's trade gap has been widening since December. Imports are on the increase, surging by a cumulative 26pc through the year to \$56.1bn from \$44.6bn. This was expected because of the poor wheat, sugar and cotton harvests last year. The rapid increase in machinery imports as a result of the availability of substantially subsidised long-term finance for new investments and the replacement of outdated technology is another factor pushing imports. In addition, rising global commodity prices on the back of a surge in demand as the world limps towards some kind of normalcy has also contributed to an increase in the import bill. In comparison, the nation's exports have grown by just 18.2pc to \$25.3bn from \$11.4bn. Even though the country has achieved its highest ever export revenues — the last time Pakistan fetched more than \$25bn in export dollars was in 2014 — the performance is not that encouraging when considered in terms of GDP or the size of the economy. The nation's exports remain less than 8.5pc of GDP calculated to be around \$296bn. This compares with Bangladesh's exports that constitute more than 15pc of its GDP. Pakistan had achieved its highest ever export-to-GDP ratio of 12pc in 2011 before bottoming out to around 7.5pc in 2017.

The mounting trade deficit can be a major challenge for the country's feeble external sector. The expanding gap in what we purchase from the world and what we sell to them has already eroded the current account surplus posted in the first five months of the last fiscal year. The trend is likely to persist in the present financial year as the government targets GDP growth of 4.8pc or more. Imports are anticipated to increase even faster during this year while exports are unlikely to keep pace with them. That is likely to put pressure on the State Bank's meagre foreign exchange reserves. Last year, the Covid-19 pandemic had provided a cushion to the external account as we saw unprecedented growth in remittances sent home by Pakistanis working abroad because of restrictions on international travel, which helped the central bank finance surging imports and reduced the pressures on the country's balance-of-payments position. With the world getting vaccinated and slowly returning to normal, the remittances bonanza is unlikely to continue for too long, thus depriving the government of a major source of financing imports.

So how does the government plan to finance spiking imports — or current account deficit — in a world that is learning to live with the coronavirus? Unless it has a plan to push exports more vigorously and pursue non-debt-creating foreign direct investment, it may see foreign exchange reserves erode in the short to medium run and foreign debt mount even more rapidly.

Green Line controversy

THE under-construction mass transport project in Karachi, the Green Line Bus Rapid Transit System, already beset with delays, has run into more snags. It recently emerged that the Spanish firm, Grupsa, which is lending its technical support and services for the project, has directly complained to Pakistan's anti-corruption and investigation agencies about fraud being committed in its name.

The firm has accused one of the local contractors, through whom Grupsa is supplying automated platform screen doors, of billing the federal government over 2.7m euros (Rs502m) for the same whereas the issued invoice was for a little over 0.5m euros. Grupsa is alleging that MGH, the Pakistani contractor, "prepared a false/forged/fabricated document/invoice" to achieve its objective. In the process, it "injured the name and goodwill of Grupsa as well as [caused] a huge loss to the exchequer".

Moreover, it has sought permission for its team to be allowed to visit the site, because of reports that substandard equipment had also been installed in its name. Evidently the Spanish firm, considered one of the pioneers of automated equipment, tried approaching diplomatic channels for eight months to get someone in Pakistan's officialdom to take notice, but to no avail.

These are serious allegations, and it reflects poorly on the authorities that they have been so unresponsive to a complaint by a renowned international firm, whose sole interest — given it has already received payment — is to prevent harm to its reputation. The inaction reflects deep malaise in systems of accountability here and could discourage other reputable firms from collaborating on mega projects in Pakistan. For its part, the local contractor, MGH, has issued a statement to say that the company has taken appropriate action in a court of law against the individual involved. The matter must be resolved to the satisfaction of Grupsa and fulfil the demands of accountability. We require the assistance of global firms to develop our infrastructure, and what Karachi desperately needs more than anything else is a mass transit system.

Health risk allowance

THE federal government made the right decision to resume payment of risk allowance to healthcare workers who continue to put their lives in considerable peril as they treat patients of Covid-19. According to media reports, around 14,600 healthcare workers have been affected by the coronavirus; 143 have lost their lives in the line of duty. The issue was brought to light by National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser last week when he pointed out during a parliament session that healthcare workers had not received their risk allowance for the past 11 months. He instructed the Ministry of National Health Services to resolve the issue by the end of June. However, it appears that the challenges linked to the allowance that had caused unease in the medical fraternity last year have not gone away. The federal health ministry asked hospital managements to provide lists of 'eligible' healthcare workers treating patients of Covid-19. These proved inadequate and the decision of payment of risk allowance was left to the subjective discretion of the authorities. The same process had been followed last year, resulting in complaints that healthcare workers who were said to be in direct contact with coronavirus patients were paid more than those who were perceived to have 'only' indirect contact with such patients, including those

working in outpatient departments or performing surgeries, though they would also have been vulnerable.

Critics have pointed out that Covid-19 wards were given adequate gear, including PPEs, masks and goggles, for the protection of their staff while those working in other departments were often without any protective gear leaving them more vulnerable to exposure to undiagnosed Covid-19 patients. Many also treated Covid patients for other ailments or conducted procedures such as childbirth, putting themselves at risk. The authorities' good intentions notwithstanding, there is a need to consult experienced medical professionals for deciding on compensation for healthcare workers exposed to risk and to improve data collection so that the distribution of funds is fair and transparent.

NSA on Lahore blast

THE press conference held by the prime minister's national security adviser on Sunday regarding last month's Johar Town blast in Lahore contained some very serious statements about India's apparent involvement in the act of terrorism.

Accompanied by Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry and the Punjab police chief, NSA Moeed Yusuf categorically said that Pakistan had "concrete evidence" of India's involvement in the episode, and went on to list it.

The June 23 car bombing had killed three people. It occurred near the house of Jamaatud Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed. The NSA said that foreign suspects were involved in the violent act, including an Afghan man born in Pakistan, while the mastermind of the crime had links to the Indian spy agency RAW.

Going by the NSA's words, the evidence linking India to the act of terrorism appears strong and the government must share the proof with the international community.

The blast — and the subsequent revelations — came at a time when a nominal thaw in frosty Pakistan-India relations was underway. The recent renewal of the ceasefire along the LoC, as well as news that officials from both capitals were involved in laying the groundwork for talks about talks, apparently encouraged by common foreign friends, had signalled a lowering of the temperature in the region. Of course, the path to peace is not straight and narrow in South Asia, and is in fact strewn with all kinds of obstacles. Events such as the Lahore blast are

exactly the kind of spoilers that throw the peace process off track. However, such harmful events will continue until the main issue — Kashmir — is addressed in a frank and forward-looking manner. Pakistan must be firm that it will not tolerate acts of terrorism on its soil. At the same time, it should not allow such incidents to derail the greater quest for peace, bumpy as the road may be.

Perhaps the best option at this juncture is to keep the backchannel process, if it is currently active, alive. Away from the spotlight, Pakistan must communicate clearly to India that such malicious actions must stop if peace is to be achieved.

It is all too easy to pursue a mutually destructive path and continue to indulge in negative behaviour. But as the experience of the past seven decades shows, this approach has not brought any great dividends for the people of South Asia. The region needs to be free from war, terrorism and continuous confrontation to allow its people to march forward economically and socially. If India is serious about peace, it must stop indulging in such destabilising behaviour and talk to Pakistan about all irritants standing in the way of better ties. Pakistan can and will defend itself against hostile actions. But as this country's leadership has said repeatedly, Pakistan wants peace, and for this, the Kashmir issue must be resolved judiciously.

More press curbs

IT is a reflection of the grim times we live in that a provincial assembly can adopt a bill authorising the speaker to constitute a committee with magisterial powers and jail journalists for anything they report which is deemed as violating the privileges of the parliamentarians. The Punjab Assembly has passed this draconian bill that has justifiably triggered a wave of alarm and protest by media bodies. APNS, PBA and PFUJ have each issued statements condemning this attempt to suppress freedom of speech and demanded of the Punjab government to withdraw the bill. It should concern all people in the country that this bill — with such far-reaching consequences for the independence of the media — was passed without any significant debate by the House and without any meaningful consultation with the relevant stakeholders. This is nothing less than an outrage. However, sadly, it is not surprising. Over the last few years — and especially since the PTI came into power — there is a visible and sustained trend to curtail the independence of the media by keeping it under all kinds of

pressure. This is evident from the attitude and policies of government functionaries and the institutions they represent. Time and again journalists and media organisations have complained of visible and invisible pressures that are aimed at browbeating them into silence. The physical attacks on journalists — almost all unexplained till date — are a reminder that the cost of speaking truth to power is getting steeper by the day.

The latest to fall victim to state hounding is TV journalist Nadeem Malik who has been summoned by the FIA in what is a thinly veiled attempt at harassment. Mr Malik had revealed in his programme some alleged details of how the now deceased judge Arshad Malik had been hounded and blackmailed by powerful people to give a verdict of their choice in the case against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The FIA counterterrorism wing has issued a notice to Mr Malik and ordered him to bring evidence and information that he has shared in his show. These are the oldest tricks in the book but somehow Pakistani governments never tire of utilising them to try and bring the media to heel. However, they should know that weakening the media amounts to undermining democracy and fundamental rights as enshrined in the Constitution. The PTI government would be well advised to desist from such moves.

Afghan refugees

AS Afghanistan dives into the great unknown with the departure of foreign forces and the government in Kabul unable to stop the Afghan Taliban's onslaught, the question of refugees fleeing the conflict needs attention. This is especially so for Afghanistan's neighbours, including Pakistan. As it is, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghans seeking refuge on its soil for the past four decades, as stability has eluded this country's western neighbour. While, with the prospects of Pakhtun domination in Afghanistan, it cannot be said with certainty if it is Pakistan that will face a new refugee wave in the event that the government in Kabul collapses, the state must plan for all contingencies. According to Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid, Pakistan's borders will not be opened for refugees. Instead, the country will follow the 'Iranian model', where refuge seekers will be housed in camps along the border.

Several factors must be considered where the question of Afghan refugees is concerned. While it may be Pakistan's moral duty to provide shelter to those

fleeing war and persecution — and indeed this country has tried its best to safely house Afghans over the past few decades — we must also take stock of our own situation. It will be difficult to accommodate thousands more Afghan refugees as we lack the financial resources, as well as infrastructure, to support a large refugee population. It is also true that terrorists may infiltrate the country in the garb of those seeking shelter, affecting the security paradigm. The practicality of the ‘Iranian model’ can be considered, where those fleeing war from Afghanistan are housed in safe buffer zones along the border. But more pertinent, the international community should play its due role in aiding states hosting refugees. In particular, those states that have played a part in destabilising Afghanistan, including the US and its Nato allies, must now give generously in order to provide safe havens as well as food and medical aid to Afghan civilians fleeing a renewed flare-up in their troubled homeland.

Talking to insurgents

NOTWITHSTANDING CPEC-related development in Balochistan, insurgent groups remain active in the province. Over the years, security forces have largely contained the violence, but it is nevertheless an issue of concern in a challenging regional environment. Speaking at an event in Gwadar on Monday, Prime Minister Imran Khan voiced an intention to hold talks with “disgruntled extremists who are offering resistance in Balochistan”.

If he is indeed considering this approach, its success depends greatly on an honest and objective appraisal — within all relevant institutions — of where the state has gone wrong in its policies towards the province. After all, there must be cogent reasons why so many insurgencies have arisen in Balochistan since independence. But does there exist a capacity for such introspection? There is no doubt of course that hostile foreign elements have played, and continue to play, a role in exacerbating the conflict but they are dabbling in troubled waters. History has shown how genuine grievances left unaddressed can become a fertile ground for inimical forces to exploit.

The last time that holding talks with the ‘angry Baloch’ was pursued in earnest was when the National Party leader Dr Abdul Malik was chief minister of Balochistan. He had reached out to the separatist leaders in exile, and may have even met some of them on a visit to London. Dr Malik’s efforts, however, were

doomed to fail in an environment where the execrable ‘kill and dump’ policy towards any Baloch suspected of separatist leanings was still being applied — especially given that he had in his electoral campaign vowed to bring the practice to an end. It left no doubt as to who was actually in charge of the policy towards the province. The chasm of mistrust between the disaffected Baloch and the state has only grown wider with every facile promise, every sham election and every ‘development package’ that never delivered what it claimed to. And the stories of the missing Baloch add to the sense of historical injustice.

Any serious attempt at reaching out to the insurgents needs to have the consensus of the civilian government as well as the security establishment, and it must be based on a willingness to make concessions. The state must loosen its control over Balochistan’s resources, profits from which must be ploughed back into the province to an extent and in a manner that meets the requirements of justice. Given the trust deficit, it would make sense to involve nationalist leaders — such as Dr Malik and BNP-M’s Akhtar Mengal — who may still have the ear of the ‘angry Baloch’, in the effort to ‘woo’ them. Some observers believe the time for building bridges has long gone, but it is also a fact that many Baloch yearn for peace and feel caught between the separatists and the state. That is a desire worth tapping into.

LG restoration

THE Supreme Court judgement overturning the premature dissolution of local governments in Punjab more than two years ago is a landmark decision since it establishes LGs’ fundamental right to complete their mandated term as provided by the law. The detailed judgement, released on Monday, on a petition challenging the dissolution of LG institutions, observes that “...[T]he local governments’ offices in Punjab were political Governments and had fundamental rights as provided in the Constitution to run for their duration as provided by law”. It points out that the LG system “established ... through Provincial Legislation when translate[d] into an elected local government for a specified period of time by law cannot be dissolved before the period of its expiry....” The court had already restored the LGs through a short order issued in March, declaring their dissolution unconstitutional. The order had ruled that by dissolving the LGs, the Punjab government had disenfranchised people who voted for their

representatives. Such an action was “in conflict with Article 17 of the Constitution, read with Articles 140A, 7 and 32....”

The short court order had been expected to knock some sense into the ruling party and restore the dissolved LGs to let them complete their remaining tenure. Regrettably, that didn't happen, and the provincial government chose to wait for the detailed judgement rather than grab the opportunity to fix its errors and reinstate its democratic credentials. Although the decision leaves it with no option but to restore the dissolved LGs, it is unlikely to walk this path. Instead, the PTI government is more likely to go for a review of the decision, despite little or no chance of its reversal, in order to buy time until the five-year term of the current LG expires in January next year. That none of the four provinces have functional LGs at the moment (nor do they appear to be in a mood to organise elections anytime soon) speaks volumes for politicians' aversion to the third tier of government and their reluctance to share administrative and financial power with local public representatives, especially if they belong to the opposition parties. It is, therefore, not surprising to see frequent premature rollbacks of local democracy, invalidating public mandates every few years. Whether or not Punjab acts on the court's decision, the judgement is an important victory for the people and local democracy as it is expected to ensure that public mandate is not cut short in future.

Protecting misogyny

THE prospect of enacting legislation against domestic violence inevitably throws certain sections of this society into a moral panic. Specious arguments referring to traditional and religious values are used to give a patina of legitimacy to what is essentially a desire to preserve a misogynistic culture predicated on men controlling women. Unfortunately, it seems that for many in the PTI government, the protection of women is subservient to pandering to these regressive elements.

Adviser to the PM on Parliamentary Affairs Babar Awan has written to the National Assembly speaker seeking a review by the Council of Islamic Ideology of the domestic violence bill passed by the Lower House in April this year. In his communiqué, Mr Awan said that concerns have been raised “regarding various definitions and other contents of the bill”.

The proposed legislation was tabled in the National Assembly by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari — proving that some within the government are cognisant of their duty towards one-half of the population — and passed the same day.

Now, it seems it will be sent to a body that in 2016 came up with a women’s protection bill that allowed a husband to beat his wife “if needed”. The CII has in the past also opposed a minimum age for marriage, and declared DNA evidence to be of secondary value in rape cases. Its stance has often been contrary to logic, science and fundamental human rights, including Pakistan’s obligations under international law.

Notwithstanding resistance to some degree or the other, Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab passed laws against DV several years ago. PTI-ruled KP only passed such legislation in January this year, that too after having its bill vetted by the CII, the sole province to have done so. The result, not surprisingly, is a watered-down piece of legislation. This, despite the fact that not a day passes without evidence of the terrible treatment that females are subjected to in this country at the hands of their own families. And only the most egregious cases come to light: much of the suffering remains unseen, stifled under the weight of ‘tradition’ and the expectations of being a ‘dutiful’ wife/sister/daughter.

The house of representatives should not enable unelected right-wing elements to impose their agenda on society via the CII.

If anything, legislation against gender-based violence must be strengthened instead of diluted. The Supreme Court in a judgement on Monday declared that the Protection of Women Against Harassment in the Workplace Act in its present form is limited in scope. Any action or behaviour that is not demonstrably ‘sexual’ in nature does not fall within its definition of what constitutes harassment, said the court, howsoever grave and devastating it may be for the victim. This is the reality. We have only taken initial steps towards protecting women; there is a long road ahead. Regrettably, the PTI government is marching in the opposite direction.

Bond sale

MANY are interpreting Pakistan's purchases of fresh debt of \$1bn through a tap sale of its three-part dollar-denominated Eurobond, which had fetched \$2.5bn in March, at a slightly lower price than the indicative rate for the five-, 10- and 30-year tenors, as a sign of international investors' increasing trust in the country's growth story. How correct is their observation? Indeed, investors have given Pakistan some discount in terms of lower rates. But the fact is that even the 'discounted' interest rate is still considerably above what they would earn if they had bought US Treasury bills. The spread of around 5pc is too attractive for international investors to ignore in spite of the potential risks around the nation's current account from the projected decline in workers' remittances and the rising global commodity markets, the continuing Covid-19 pandemic on the back of a slow vaccination drive, and, last but not least, the possibility of the IMF distancing itself from Islamabad because of a reappraisal of targets in the budget. The same is the case with the Roshan Digital Accounts initiative of the central bank, which offers a hefty 7pc profit to overseas Pakistanis for keeping their savings in Pakistani banks. Who wouldn't want to bring their money here if they are given this opportunity to earn far more than they could expect to on their savings in their countries of residence?

The fact is that Pakistan could have done more to take advantage of the international low interest rate environment while lifting debt from the international markets — both in March and this week. On top of that, it has locked its long-term debt on 10- and 30-year papers at a very high price while it should have gone for shorter-term notes of up to five-year tenors only. Perhaps the policymakers did not have much choice at a time when Pakistan's external financing needs are growing. The current account has been posting a deficit for the last seven months as the trade gap is widening on increasing imports and rising global commodity prices. The international oil prices hit a multi-year high recently and we have to wait and see how the market will behave going forward. With the government's external financing target through commercial sources during the present fiscal estimated to be around \$5.5bn and the IMF programme on hold, there was probably little choice but to offer a higher spread to woo global interest.

Dilip Kumar's legacy

TOMES have been written about his magical and unparalleled talent as a movie actor. The late thespian Dilip Kumar, however, endeared himself to South Asia's moviegoers with more than his range and calibre as an actor's actor. It was his studiously cultured persona and dedicated work as a public intellectual — rather cannily in the footsteps of his self-confessed icon Marlon Brando — that promises to be inexorably entwined with Dilip Kumar's lasting memory. He spoke for peace and communal harmony, a factor that may have prompted the Pakistan government to anoint him with its highest civilian award in 1998. The citation described Dilip Kumar as a great actor, of course, but also underlined his struggle for multicultural and multiethnic harmony. That naturally riled reactionary quarters in India. The fact that his death on Wednesday at 98 coincided with a sharp downturn in India's political standing as a rainbow democracy is thus not bereft of irony.

Dilip Kumar's early grooming and eclectic education enabled him to make a seamless transition as a polyglot between his native Pashto, which he spoke fluently with Punjabi and Urdu in which he excelled. American-born actor Tom Alter asked him the secret of his brilliance. Pat came the reply: "Sher-o-sukhan." Simply put, love of literature and Urdu poetry in particular showed starkly in the aura of the actor called Dilip Kumar. This was true of his contemporaries too, like Balraj Sahni and Motilal. It was another era. He was, however, not constrained by his love for Urdu. The one immensely successful movie he made — Ganga Jamuna — saw him and his handpicked Tamil heroine Vyjayanthimala delivering lines with near accuracy in the difficult Bhojpuri dialect of eastern UP. Dilip Kumar pointedly questioned any link between his language and his religion as a Muslim. There wasn't a movie other than the magnum opus Mughal-i-Azam in which he played a Muslim character. Yet it was sher-o-sukhan that inspired his fabled dialogues and the pauses between the lines.

Boosting automobile sales

THE past 15 years have proved to be quite a bumpy ride for the country's automobile industry which has seen many ups and downs since the late 2000s. The last three years have been particularly bad for the industry which is undoubtedly one of the most protected sectors of the economy. Carmakers are often criticised for the high prices of vehicles and their poor quality and missing

safety features, delayed deliveries, the exorbitant premium buyers are forced to pay and so on.

In their defence, the manufacturers have always blamed the massive government taxes that amount to over 40pc of the total price in certain cases and very low economies of scale as only 17 out of every 1,000 Pakistanis own a car compared to 77 in Indonesia, 281 in Thailand and 70 in India. The import of cheaper, used cars under various schemes for overseas Pakistanis is also said to have suffocated local car production. While the government has made the import of used cars difficult, it has significantly cut automobile taxes in the budget to bring down their prices. The assemblers have already responded to the initiative and revised down their prices, which is expected to push car sales in the country.

The rest of the issues facing the industry, according to Industries Minister Khusro Bakhtiar, will be addressed in the new Automotive Industry Development and Export Policy 2021-26 to be announced next month. From the broader details given by the minister, the new policy can be expected to push car demand, create jobs across the supply chain, incentivise local assembly of environment-friendly hybrids, encourage localisation and value addition of parts used in car manufacturing and promote exports. Additionally, the new policy will address late delivery and high premiums, as well as force manufacturers to improve safety features.

But what the proposed policy does not address is just as important, if not more. Although the cuts in tax have led to a significant decrease in prices, 'entry level' small cars still remain outside the reach of first-time buyers hailing from middle-income groups. Likewise, it doesn't carry incentives for foreign carmakers to take steps for the localisation of more sophisticated engines and other hi-tech parts. Nor does it make clear if the consumers will have to pay extra for new safety features. Also, there is no compulsion for foreign carmakers to introduce their models in every engine size to create healthy competition in the market and give consumers more choices at affordable and competitive prices. The automotive industry can play a big part in growing an economy. But the government must ensure that the industry doesn't focus only on profits by catering to the needs of the moneyed segments only; the middle class should also be able to afford and enjoy a better ride.

A regional solution?

THAT the US and its Nato allies are in a hurry to wash their hands off the Afghan imbroglio is clear. Nearly all the foreign troops have left the beleaguered country as the Afghan Taliban march from district to district, giving the Kabul administration a tough time. The latest Afghan province to face the Taliban's onslaught has been Badghis, as the armed movement stormed the provincial capital Qala-i-Naw on Wednesday. Strangely, on the same day that the Afghan government and Taliban were confronting each other on the battlefield, another meeting featuring both sides was taking place in the Iranian capital Tehran. Government representatives sat across the table from senior members of the Taliban's political wing, as Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif urged them to "make difficult decisions for the future of their country". Mr Zarif added that "the Islamic Republic is always ready to facilitate the continuation of your talks". Earlier this week, while speaking in Gwadar, Prime Minister Imran Khan had also highlighted the role regional states could play in helping facilitate dialogue in Afghanistan, while adding that he had discussed the issue with newly elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

The aforementioned developments indicate that regional states can and should play a more proactive role in bringing together Afghan factions to ensure the country does not enter a full-blown civil war the moment Western forces complete their withdrawal. Of course, regional states, particularly Pakistan and Iran, as well as the Central Asian countries, have specific concerns if chaos engulfs Afghanistan. These states will bear the brunt of the refugees in case of large-scale violence, and where Pakistan is concerned it is hardly in a position to shoulder more responsibility on this count. Moreover, if there is no effective central authority in Afghanistan, neighbouring states will be major targets for terrorist groups which will thrive in the chaos. Therefore, the time is right for regional states to push the Afghan factions towards peace. Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian states as well as Turkey and the Gulf Arabs should lead this effort, while Russia and China can also be kept in the loop. All these states, particularly Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have influence with the ethnic and religious groups that dominate Afghan politics. Hence, it is hoped that efforts to come up with a regional solution to the Afghan question succeed in the days to come.

4m victims and counting

A NEW grim milestone was marked in the pandemic this week, when the total number of global Covid-19 deaths reached 4m. The figure represents the thousands of deaths that may have been preventable had world leaders been scientific and transparent in their respective approaches. The US, India, Brazil, Mexico and Peru are the countries with the world's highest coronavirus-related death tolls in the last year. The common thread among them is that their leaders gave advice that reeked of Covid denial. For instance, US president Donald Trump dismissed the serious health risks of the virus and gave mixed signals about public health guidance. In India, the government allowed mass gatherings of millions at both religious and political events. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro rejected lockdowns when infections were peaking, criticised states that followed scientific advice and dangerously joked about how the Pfizer jab would "turn people into crocodiles". Citizens and healthcare workers in these countries and elsewhere, such as the United Kingdom, have paid a heavy price for poor leadership. Though many countries are now opening up after having successfully vaccinated large swathes of their population, there are many that are still in a crisis. In Indonesia, a surge in Covid-19 deaths has pushed the country's hospital systems to its limit. On Wednesday this week, single-day fatalities crossed 1,000 — a harrowing reality that played out at hospitals where emergency wards were overwhelmed. In Russia, too, a surge of cases has driven demand for the vaccine, and forced the government to shut down vaccination centres where supply dries up.

The coming days — and possibly virus mutations — will show the extent to which the existing vaccines protect citizens. But even as countries reopen after mass vaccinations, the decision to lift all restrictions, including mandatory mask-wearing, may lead to another surge. The WHO has warned countries of the "epidemiological stupidity" of early Covid reopening. There are lessons in this warning for everyone, including Pakistan, where low vaccination rates mean that the threat of a bad outbreak is always looming.

Faulty grids

LAHORE'S residents have been suffering for the past several days from intermittent power outages lasting for two to six hours a day amid soaring temperatures. Apparently, the blackouts are not being caused by the supply gaps but a faulty transmission system of the National Transmission and Despatch Company. According to Lesco, the power utility that sells electricity in Punjab's capital as well as its adjoining districts, the problem originates primarily from the NTDC's two overloaded grids, which feed its distribution network before tripping the utility's supply system across a large part of the city. For five years now, a number of NTDC grids across the urban centres of the province have been facing the issue of 'overloading' during peak demand hours. Yet, the NTDC has done nothing to upgrade the grids to manage the rising electricity demand load. However, Lesco too cannot hide behind the faulty grids operated by the transmission company. Its own distribution system has also been in dire need of urgent upgradation for a very long time now. The residents of Ichhra, a lower-middle-income neighbourhood in the heart of Lahore, for example, were forced to bear continuous power outages on Thursday through Friday owing to a faulty transformer.

The government seems to be failing in ensuring uninterrupted power supply to people in spite of the 'excess' generation capacity and the promises it keeps making. The truth is that it has failed to invest and improve power transmission and the distribution infrastructure in the country. Power outages in the country during the peak summer season have become a routine affair because of deteriorating supply networks. The situation in smaller cities and the rural areas of the province, as well as in the rest of the country, is reported to be even worse. The only way of overcoming the menace of unscheduled power cuts — and stopping widespread electricity theft and system losses — lies in the upgradation of the transmission and distribution infrastructure. Until then, consumers will continue to suffer.

Mirwaiz's call

AFTER a considerably lengthy silence, leader of his faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has issued a statement stressing the need to "resolve the Kashmir conflict urgently", while pointing out that India must stop engineering demographic change in the disputed region. These demands came in a statement the incarcerated Mirwaiz released to the media.

He observed that while the renewal of the ceasefire along the LoC between Pakistan and India earlier this year was welcome, “not much has moved forward since”. He also called for the release of all political prisoners India has kept incarcerated, including Yasin Malik, who is suffering from a heart problem, and Shabir Shah.

The points raised by the veteran leader need to be considered by India, as its steps to curb the Kashmiri people’s desire for freedom by force have failed. The biggest indication of this came when Narendra Modi met a select group of Kashmiri leaders last month. Though the group consisted mostly of loyalists, even in that meeting the issue of political prisoners was raised, particularly by Mehbooba Mufti, former chief minister of India-held Kashmir. The fact is that strangulating the voice of Kashmir by incarcerating its political leadership is a failed strategy. Moreover, it is unconscionable that leaders with serious health issues are being kept behind bars by India. As the Mirwaiz pointed out, “even during Covid times, iron-fisted measures and institutional oppression continue”. But, the resistance in occupied Kashmir refuses to die down, as India claimed killing a number of Kashmiri fighters on Thursday.

If India is serious about resolving the Kashmir question, it must heed the advice of Mirwaiz and other leaders of the held region. Altering the region’s demographics by settling outsiders in Kashmir will make an already tense situation explosive, as the disputed area’s people are denied jobs, land and economic opportunities in their homeland. This will only add to alienation from India.

Moreover, as New Delhi has opened channels to loyalist Kashmiri leaders — some of whom it had detained after the events of August 2019 — it must also talk to the pro-freedom leaders of the occupied area, including the APHC factions. As Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said in his statement, “the resolution of the Kashmir conflict” can come “through dialogue among India, Pakistan and the people of J&K”. New Delhi must recognise the truth of this and send positive signals to the Kashmiris as well as Pakistan.

As we have stated before in this space, peace in South Asia largely hinges on a just resolution to the Kashmir question. Unless this is achieved, the people of the held region will continue to suffocate under Indian rule, while the wide gulf between Islamabad and New Delhi will also remain. India can send a strong

message by releasing all incarcerated Kashmiri leaders, and reversing the controversial laws concerning occupied Kashmir that it has passed.

Consultation on polls

THE government's assurance to the ECP that it won't steamroller electoral reforms into law is encouraging. Stakeholders in recent weeks have levelled severe criticism against the government for pushing amendments through ordinances and bypassing the consultative process on the subject. The issue of including the granting of voting rights to overseas Pakistanis and the use of electronic voting machines in the next general elections became an especially controversial one, so the attorney general's assurance to the poll body that the right process will be followed is indeed welcome. The new participatory tone taken by the government is further underlined by the fact that a motion seeking the formation of a parliamentary committee on electoral reforms has already been adopted in the National Assembly.

Given the ruling party's perennial bullishness over consultations with opposition parties, and Prime Minister Imran Khan's public snub to the ECP after the Senate elections, the upcoming consultative process for electoral reforms will be a litmus test of the government's sincerity in addressing flaws in the electoral system. The post-Eid period will show how committed the government is to this process. The contentious issue of EVMs and the generally thorny relationship between the ruling party and opposition means the government needs to be prepared for a fiery consultative process, with the goal that a robust debate results in reforms through consensus. The guiding principle here should be that electoral reforms which enable a free and fair election are critical for the country. Too many elections have been tainted by interference, rigging and allegations of foul play. If the bypolls held not too long ago are anything to go by, the next general election could be dangerously divisive and even violent if parties across the political spectrum are not on the same page when it comes to the voting process. Four years ago, the ruling PML-N, too, was heavily criticised by the PTI, then in the opposition, for bulldozing the Election Commission Bill, 2017, through the National Assembly. At the time, members of the PTI had criticised the government for passing a bill "against the spirit of the Constitution". Ironically, in power, the PTI has been accused of the same by the opposition, with the ECP also expressing alarm over 28 clauses of the electoral reforms bill. The ruling

party ought to engage the opposition and respect the ECP as the attorney general has pledged it will. Failure to do so will be a loss for democracy.

The Delta concern

THE spread of the highly transmissible Delta variant in the country has sparked fears of a looming disaster.

NCOC chair Asad Umar this week warned that artificial intelligence models indicate “clear signs” that Pakistan is experiencing its fourth wave. The positivity ratio in Islamabad this week jumped to 7pc. The national positivity ratio was under 4pc as of yesterday, but given the rate at which the virus is spreading, it will not be long before this figure grows to untenable levels.

True, vaccination is underway, but the pace is far too slow for large swathes of the population to have achieved immunity. Less than 4m people in the country are fully vaccinated, while the government’s target is 70m vaccinated adults.

In the first three waves, a combination of luck and smart lockdowns meant that Pakistan fortunately escaped the devastating scenarios that were witnessed in parts of Europe and India. However, this time, with the spread of the Delta variant, the fear that mass infections will cripple communities and healthcare infrastructure is frighteningly real.

In India, the second wave and the widespread Delta variant saw hundreds of thousands dead and many more critically ill. The spread of the disease in areas where hospital infrastructure is poor meant that citizens with little access to healthcare facilities died. This nightmare scenario unfolded in India weeks after government politicians recklessly boasted that they had beaten Covid-19.

In Pakistan, a similar attitude can be observed both among government figures and members of the public. Because Covid-19 cases and deaths have remained comparatively lower than in other countries, there is a misconception that the virus will not have the same devastating effects here as it has had in so many other countries. This misguided belief has no scientific basis.

Pakistan is lucky not to have plunged into an all-out disaster, but a variant such as Delta can take us there. In India, 55pc of deaths were caused by variants of concern. If authorities do not enforce SOPs, ramp up vaccinations, and roll out

mass testing, the present wave of infections could overwhelm the existing healthcare infrastructure. This would mean hundreds of preventable deaths and worsening illnesses. The government cannot limit its actions to appeals that citizens protect themselves. It must test more, do more to speed up vaccinations and implement SOPs, such as smart lockdowns, in areas where there are outbreaks.

Population emergency

OVER the past two decades, successive governments have sidestepped the issue of population control and hidden behind a plethora of poverty alleviation and social development schemes. With some 225m people, Pakistan has the world's fifth largest population. With a national growth rate of around 2pc, at least 4.4m people are added to the existing numbers every year. This addition alone is equal to the combined population of 40 of the world's smallest countries. Unfortunately, there is virtual silence on the subject on the part of our political leaders. Does this attitude result from complacency and a tendency to dismiss long-term challenges, or are our leaders simply not prepared to irk the religious right by bringing up the topic? Even at the Islamabad Security Dialogue held in March, the threat posed by our galloping numbers to the country's natural and human resources hardly figured in the conversation. Surely, our political leadership led by the prime minister, who talks candidly about other uncomfortable yet important global issues, can end the awkward silence that surrounds a pressing national (and international) problem. Indeed, the government took religious leaders and scholars on board to make a combined attempt at ensuring compliance with Covid-19-related SOPs during Ramazan; can't the same be done to develop a coherent narrative on the need to bring down the population growth rate to sustainable levels?

Given the controversial nature of the debate, perhaps there can be greater emphasis on 'family health' rather than 'population control', since many see the latter as a Western conspiracy against Muslim societies. An effort can be made to talk about maternal health in the context of religion and the nation's social development. Pakistan's national fertility rate of 3.6 means that on average a mother has at least three children, with one being unplanned. This figure is higher than the whole of South Asia's (2.4pc), the region itself having the highest fertility rate in the world. No surprise then that, according to the National

Nutritional Survey 2018, 42pc of women of reproductive age are at least moderately anaemic. The aim should be to gently steer people's decisions by promoting this year's theme for World Population Day that is being observed today: 'Rights and choices are the answer: whether baby boom or bust, the solution to shifting fertility rates lies in prioritising the reproductive health and rights of all people'.

Surely there can be no argument about the fact that healthy mothers are the key to having healthy children and that birth spacing encourages healthier families. Even in Saudi Arabia, women can access family planning as part of healthcare. Almost all other large Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, etc have successfully implemented population reforms through broad consensus led by their respective governments. Pakistan must make efforts to arrest and bring down its population growth rate before it's too late.

Tax notices

HARASSMENT of taxpayers by the FBR is wrong, illegal and unacceptable. But equally wrong, illegal and unacceptable is the widespread tax theft by the wealthy and powerful. For some years now, the FBR has been serving notices on people, including traders and others, to ensure they start to regularly pay taxes on their incomes and file their returns. A senior FBR official told a parliamentary panel recently that just over 10pc of nearly 13m people who were served tax notices in the last three years had responded and started filing their returns. The FBR had raised a tax demand of Rs64.3bn through these notices but ended up recovering just Rs2.6bn. How does a campaign by the tax authorities to ensure tax compliance by non-filers amount to harassment of taxpayers as alleged by the members of the parliamentary panel?

The intervention of parliamentarians across the political divide on behalf of the tax delinquents and equating tax notices with harassment will weaken the already feeble writ of the tax machinery, which is reflected by the majority of people ignoring tax notices. It also amounts to encouraging a culture where people, especially powerful business lobbies and big farmers, either don't have to pay their taxes or can get away with paying a meagre sum. In a country where 3m people file their tax returns and where the tax-to-GDP ratio of close to 10pc

remains one of the lowest anywhere, parliamentarians are sending the wrong message by supporting tax evaders. There's no doubt that the FBR is inefficient and allegedly corrupt, and its functionaries are notorious for resorting to high-handed tactics to extort money from taxpayers. But stopping it from doing its job is not the answer. The solution lies in reforming the tax machinery through the extensive use of technology to minimise contact with taxpayers, cut the discretionary powers of taxmen and hold the latter accountable to taxpayers. Simultaneously, the taxpayers' complaint remedial mechanism needs to be strengthened and the fear of stern action instilled among tax dodgers.

Seaside or toxic brew?

IN terms of areas of operation in which Pakistan has failed to do anywhere near enough, there is no dearth of points of indictments. Let us take up a mere two: the state's lack of commitment to the welfare of the majority of its population, and its apparent insensibility to what must be done now for sustainable well-being. Examine the sad realities of Clifton Beach, the iconic face of Pakistan's financial lynchpin Karachi or the 'City by the Sea'. The subject was taken up in a long-form article published recently by this newspaper, detailing the findings of an advocacy group. Given the pandemic's challenges, questionnaires and remote interviews were used to gather the public's views (though a good number of interviews were conducted in person too, with visitors at the venue). Respondents included persons across politico-economic divides, gender, age and occupation.

The lack of safety measures and amenities such as washrooms, gazebos, and lockers, as well as extreme land and water pollution, were overwhelmingly pinpointed as major deterrents to a pleasurable day at the seaside. But also significant were issues of access: large chunks of land are being given over to housing/commercial schemes, and luxury recreation spots, preventing a huge number of the city's some 18m to 20m residents from visiting what is rightfully Karachi's jewel in the crown. Ironically, given the fears voiced over safety (muggings, the harassment of women and the lack of lifeguards and buoys delineating safe swimming areas), also rife were complaints of over-policing, lower-income visitors being questioned for entering posh areas, the erection of walls and barriers and the sale of tickets to what ought to be a venue free to the public. Add to this the 'development' that fails to keep an eye on the future,

achieved through the collusion of state authorities, real estate players and wealthy vested-interest parties, and you have a toxic mix where the welfare of the city and its residents are cynically being sacrificed at the altar of Mammon.

Cross-border attacks

THE prospects are grim and potentially bloody. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and National Security Adviser Dr Moeed Yusuf have both warned that the situation in Afghanistan is highly unstable and the fallout can affect Pakistan. In a detailed briefing at the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on Friday, the two officials spelt out the severe challenges faced by Pakistan in the shape of refugees and militancy from across the border.

The Afghan Taliban are swiftly capturing territory in the north and south of Kabul and the Afghan National Army has failed so far to put up any significant resistance. US President Joe Biden in a speech earlier this week reiterated that the withdrawal of American forces will be completed by the end of August except for those troops left behind for the security of the US embassy in Kabul. Having faced such a situation before, and suffered the consequences of faulty decisions, Pakistan must now take timely and decisive action to overcome the challenge presented by the volatile situation across the border.

The Taliban appear unwilling for a negotiated settlement at this point — victory on the battlefield being only a matter of time — so Pakistan has limited options to influence what happens inside Afghanistan. This is not for any lack of trying. Pakistan has played perhaps the most proactive role in pushing the Taliban towards a power-sharing arrangement but the situation on the ground has generated its own momentum towards a conflict. Pakistan's focus therefore should be on how to minimise the toxic fallout from Afghanistan as it inches closer to a full-blown civil war.

The conflict has already begun to dislocate people and many are heading for the borders. Pakistani officials have yet to announce a policy, though many including the interior minister have said they are seriously considering the 'Iranian model' of restricting refugees to border camps and not allowing them to blend in with the local population. Time is running out and the government should make a decision without delay and announce it to the world. Pakistan cannot, despite all its best

intentions, bear the load of a large influx of refugees and it should let the international community know this in clear terms.

Linked to this is the resurgence of militancy and terrorism inside Pakistan. Dr Yusuf has acknowledged the danger that terrorists from the banned TTP and other groups could infiltrate Pakistan along with the refugees and it would be difficult for authorities to differentiate between them. Although the Taliban have stated they would not allow their territory to be used for terrorism against Pakistan, it is vital that Pakistani authorities drive this point home with them with greater emphasis. At the same time, we need to enhance our counterterrorism and law-enforcement capabilities to tackle this renewed threat that is building up across the border. Tough days lie ahead.

Factory fire

AN avoidable tragedy in Bangladesh on Friday claimed at least 52 lives when a massive inferno tore through a factory just outside Dhaka. Reports suggested that highly flammable chemicals and plastics were stockpiled inside, facilitating the fire in spreading quickly. Trapped workers could not go up to the rooftop, from where they could have been more easily rescued, because the exit doors had been padlocked. Nor could they go downstairs because the lower floors were engulfed in flames. The disaster is bound to revive memories of Dhaka's Rana Plaza disaster in 2013. Around 1,000 people working in a garment factory inside the multistorey building died when the structure collapsed. The huge death toll, which amounted to the worst accident in the garment industry's history, led to a public outcry and demands for improvement in workplace safety. Given that several global chains sourced their products from the factory, the campaign was particularly successful in effecting a number of major legislative actions to raise safety standards. There have been concerns expressed of late, however, that Bangladesh is slipping back into its old ways and Friday's blaze may be evidence of that.

In Pakistan, the death of hundreds of toiling factory workers is not enough to even briefly shake officialdom out of its apathy. Nearly nine years after the horrific Baldia factory fire which killed 258 people, little has changed on the ground. In fact, matters have deteriorated further. The Global Rights Index 2016 of the International Trade Union Confederation ranked Pakistan among the worst

countries in the world for workers, falling in the fourth out of five categories. In 2020, the country slid to category five, which denotes “no guarantee of rights”. The factory inspection mechanisms remain woefully inadequate. While the Factories Act 1934 and the adoption of the same law by the provincial assemblies empowered the second-tier governments to enforce effective labour inspection protocols, implementation has been faulty. In fact, in 2019, the Punjab government imposed a ban on the labour department’s periodic inspections of factories in the interest of ‘promoting industry and investment’ in the province. The action shows a callous disregard for the well-being of workers — an evidently dispensable commodity — in favour of giving carte blanche to industrialists to maximise their profits by whatever means possible. Consider the impact of this skewed lens on the mining industry alone. In 2020, at least 208 miners lost their lives in mineral and coal mines in Pakistan.

Unfair campaigning

AS the campaign for elections in Azad Kashmir heats up, political rivals are hurling all kinds of accusations at each other on matters that should remain insulated from partisan one-upmanship. PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz is leading her party’s campaign and drawing large, impassioned crowds at her rallies. The PTI has announced that Prime Minister Imran Khan will also soon be hitting the campaign trail in AJK to help the party cross the winning line. Tradition holds that the party in power in the centre usually wins in AJK though the opposition this time is claiming it would defy this tradition and vanquish the PTI. The PPP’s Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari also delivered fiery speeches at his rallies — often times taking a dig at the PML-N leadership too — but has now travelled to the United States with less than two weeks to go till the Kashmir elections.

While the rivals have talked about how they have contributed to developing the region, it is being noted with a degree of concern that the handling of the issue of Jammu and Kashmir is also becoming a point of contention in this campaign. Ms Nawaz has been bitterly criticising Prime Minister Khan for doing nothing while India revoked the special status of India-held Kashmir and converted it into a union territory. She has also been consistently saying her party would not allow the PTI government to convert Azad Kashmir into a province, thereby insinuating that the ruling party intends to make AJK a part of Pakistan. Ms Nawaz knows well any such step would be against the UN resolutions on Kashmir that have

formed the basis of Pakistan's official position on the dispute. This is a grave charge to make against a rival and not entirely fair. The prime minister has been advocating a clear position on India's illegal steps of Aug 5, 2019, and has said there would be no normalisation of relations, and no official dialogue or negotiations with India till it reverses this step. No political leader has advocated a departure from our principled position which illustrates the broad consensus that Pakistani political leaders have on the Kashmir issue. This consensus gives the policy strength. Partisan rivalries should not weaken it under any circumstances.

It is therefore important for politicians campaigning in Azad Kashmir to be very careful not to generate a needless controversy over our policy on the dispute. When politicians accuse each other of 'selling out' on Kashmir, or going soft on the issue, they do a disservice to this just cause. This is a critical time for the Kashmir issue and the Pakistani leadership needs to be cognisant of the fact that confusion, obfuscation and unsubstantiated allegations can have an adverse impact on how the international community perceives our approach to the dispute. A wiser choice of words would do everyone good.

No local democracy

POLITICAL rhetoric notwithstanding, local governments have always been an aberration in Pakistan. Half-hearted attempts to decentralise governance through the transfer of financial, administrative and political authority to the LGs have been marred mostly by political parties' strong aversion to sharing power with local public representatives, and the bureaucracy's hunger to retain its unchallenged hold over decision-making and resources. This is all too evident in the chequered history of Pakistan's third tier of government. The tendency to unashamedly undermine local democracy, in favour of centralised governance at both the provincial and federal levels, has become an ubiquitous part of our political culture and exposes the ruling politicians' reluctance to organise local elections unless forced to do so by the courts. Even when they agree to the elections, they do not devolve powers to this tier.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Imran Khan, who often spoke in support of decentralising powers while in opposition, has been unable to promote governance through local representatives. The unlawful dismissal two years ago

of LGs in Punjab by the provincial government that has resorted to legal technicalities to avoid reinstating them — in defiance of a Supreme Court judgement — reveals the leadership's weak commitment to local democracy. Many believe that the present dispensation would rather wait out the term of the LGs controlled mostly by the PML-N, its arch-rival in Punjab, than revive them. The concern is understandable as the PML-N can generate enough noise against the PTI administration at the local level and hurt its chances in the next local elections, providing the LGs are reinstated. The situation in Sindh is not much different. The PPP doesn't seem to be in a mood to organise local polls in the province even after the expiry of the tenure of the previous LGs almost a year back. Instead, if media reports are to be believed, it is trying to manage a city like Karachi through PPP loyalist Murtaza Wahab Siddiqui, by vesting in the unelected provincial adviser powers on behalf of the Sindh government. This action ill behoves a party that had led the effort to amend the Constitution to make the provinces more autonomous politically, fiscally and administratively. The devolution project started with the 18th Amendment in 2010 will remain incomplete without strengthening local democracy and empowering LGs for effective and participatory governance. Sindh could set an example for the rest of the country by putting in place autonomous LGs and immediately holding local elections.

Muslim women's 'sale'

THERE is little doubt that India's minorities — particularly its Muslims — have had a tough time under Narendra Modi's watch. The right-wing leader has seemingly given carte blanche to Hindutva zealots to make the lives of India's Muslim citizens miserable. The state has played a key role in passing discriminatory laws, while it has failed to act when the goons of the Sangh Parivar hounded and killed Muslims.

Recently, the perils Muslim women face in Prime Minister Modi's India were highlighted when a fake online 'auction' claimed to 'sell' these women by posting their pictures online, while using a derogatory term for them. Charges have been filed, but the perpetrators of this despicable act have yet to be traced, and are widely believed to be Hindutva trolls. Among the victims are pilots, journalists and researchers, solely targeted for being Muslim women.

Of course, women in general face much abuse online globally. In this case, misogyny and Islamophobia have come together in a toxic mix, making cyberspace a more dangerous place for women. As one targeted journalist commented, “Muslim men are lynched, Muslim women are harassed and sold online. When will this end?”

The Indian government — if it still claims to adhere to secularism — must take to task those behind this sick stunt. The threat of online abuse translating into real-world harassment and violence cannot be ignored, hence action must be taken. More generally, online platforms must do more to make sure they are not being used to spread hateful, misogynistic and anti-Muslim content.

However, it is a sad fact that in India, cabinet members as well as chief ministers have issued deplorable anti-Muslim statements, and have not even received a slap on the wrist from Mr Modi for their hateful rhetoric. When such behaviour emanates from the top, naturally the ideological foot soldiers of the Sangh will take it as their cue to declare open season on India’s Muslims. We can only reiterate the words of the journalist quoted above: when will it end?

Criminalising torture

ONE can hope that individuals in custody will no longer emerge from detention with their bodies and spirits broken, often having confessed to crimes they did not commit simply to make the pain stop. That is, of course, if they emerge alive at all. For, after years of delay, Pakistan has finally hewed towards a more civilised approach in law enforcement.

On Monday, the Senate passed The Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Bill 2021, which will now go to the Lower House for assent and then be signed into law by the president. The remaining process must be completed as soon as possible; the government has dragged its feet on the matter for far too long. It has been 11 years since Pakistan ratified the UN Convention Against Torture and four years since it committed to enacting legislation criminalising torture during its state review under the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Sherry Rehman introduced the bill in the Upper House in February 2020, and it has been a year since the Senate human rights committee approved it.

The bill lays out a procedure for filing complaints of torture, custodial sexual violence and custodial death so that an investigation can be launched, which must be completed within 15 days after being ordered by a sessions court. Any public servant involved in torture can be sentenced for up to 10 years in prison and fined up to Rs2m. If a public servant, whose duty it is to prevent torture, either intentionally or negligently fails to prevent it, he/she will face up to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs1m. Anyone found guilty of committing, abetting or conspiring in an act of custodial death or custodial sexual violence, will be liable to imprisonment for life and with a fine of up to Rs3m. The bill affords few loopholes to anyone attempting to evade responsibility for committing these non-compoundable and non-bailable crimes.

Torture is symptomatic of a brutalised society where class divisions are pronounced and discrimination against certain groups is tolerated. An under-resourced police in such an environment — where some lives are expendable — finds it simpler to ‘show results’ through forced confessions than to get to the root of the crime. Ending the impunity with which torture is routinely practiced will be a major step towards bringing in more effective ways of investigating crime.

Law-enforcement officials must be imparted training in forensic evidence gathering techniques and in alternative methods of interrogation. This legislative change requires nothing less than a cognitive shift in how policing is viewed. Barbaric practices undermine the rule of the law, rather than strengthening it. Equally important, when the legislation against torture and custodial death is on the statute books, it must be implemented strictly without regard to rank or connections.

Electoral reforms

IN a welcome move, the government has showed its readiness to withdraw some clauses of the electoral reforms bill on which the opposition and the Election Commission of Pakistan had raised objections. During a meeting of the Senate standing committee on parliamentary affairs, Minister of State Ali Muhammad Khan said the government would not pursue anything which is against the Constitution. The committee has started the process of going over all the clauses of the bill one by one. One of the most important of these clauses pertains to giving the right to vote to overseas Pakistanis. The PTI government has fervently

pushed for this initiative while the opposition, although it agrees with the principle, wants greater clarity on the issue. Such clarity is essential because there are various aspects of the proposal that need to be thoroughly debated.

Overseas Pakistanis, as the term goes, can be broadly classified into three categories. The first are Pakistan Origin Card, or POC, holders who have surrendered their Pakistani nationality but are facilitated by the Pakistani government through this card for travel and other purposes. The second category is those who hold the National Identity Card for Overseas Pakistanis, or NICOP, many of whom are dual nationals. This card enables these individuals to travel with ease to Pakistan. The third category are those who are working abroad but retain their Pakistani nationality. These three categories need to be discussed separately in respect to provision of voting rights. Those people who have surrendered their Pakistani nationality, pay taxes in their country of residence and are eligible voters in the country they are now citizens of, may not have a very strong case for being enfranchised as Pakistani voters. The dual nationality holders have also taken an oath of allegiance to another country and therefore a case can be made against their qualification to vote in Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan is on record as having opposed allowing dual nationals to vote in Pakistani elections when he was in the opposition. Those Pakistanis, however, who retain their nationality and are working abroad have the strongest case to be allowed to vote in Pakistan. These are weighty matters and legislators should debate them thoroughly before deciding what to include in the electoral reforms bill that will become law after the revised draft is adopted by the two houses of parliament.

Onset of the monsoon

THE monsoon season, associated with heavy rainfall, is back, reviving the painful memories of the devastation caused by torrential rains and frequent flooding in the last decade. The first monsoon showers in the country the other day set off flash floods in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and deluged several villages near Pasrur in Punjab. Many parts of cities like Lahore, Sialkot and Gujrat were submerged following the first spell of the summer rains. At least four people, including two minor girls, reportedly lost their lives in flash floods in KP, while a boy was electrocuted after light rain in Karachi. The loss of life and property inflicted by the monsoon rains highlights the unpreparedness of the

administration across the provinces to meet the challenges posed by the expected heavy rainfall over the next couple of months. This is in spite of the widespread destruction and loss of life brought upon by the increasing flooding — flash and urban both — almost every year since 2010. Thus, it is not surprising that fears of flooding again loom large with the onset of the new monsoon spell.

After the deadly floods of 2010, which had affected more than 20m people in 78 districts and killed over 2,000, the authorities vowed they would protect the life and property of citizens and fortify the country's resilience to natural disasters. Not much was done, however. More recently, over 400 people lost their lives last year in flash and urban flooding that affected a population of nearly 1.1m besides damaging thousands of homes and destroying economic infrastructure in the country — mostly in Karachi and the rest of Sindh. There is no evidence that any lessons have been learnt. The country still remains unprepared to face the challenges of a downpour in cities, let alone flooding from overflowing rivers and rainwater drains even though the cost of preparing safeguards pales in comparison to the losses the monsoon causes every summer. What will it take to rouse the authorities from their apathy?

Expediting litigation

COUNTLESS litigants in Pakistan do not live to see property disputes decided in their lifetimes. According to a study conducted a few years ago by the Supreme Court, a property suit — from the time of its filing until the appellate forums rule on it — takes nearly 30 years to conclude. Not surprisingly, the glacial pace at which such cases proceed perpetuates terrible injustice against weaker members of society, especially women. In the light of this reality, a parliamentary committee on Tuesday did well to clear an amendment to the Code of Civil Procedure which stipulates that judges must decide cases of moveable and immovable property, including those involving women's inheritance rights, within one year. Further, the appellate court must give its verdict within 90 days.

Here we have an example of legislators working to ensure that a law can be implemented effectively so that it actually serves the ends of justice. Under the Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011, depriving women “by deceitful or illegal means” of property that by right belongs to them is punishable by imprisonment of up to

10 years but no less than five, or with a Rs10m fine or both. Unfortunately, men's sense of entitlement in a patriarchal system ensures that many continue to deprive their close female relatives of a share in inherited property. Most women who find themselves in such a situation are faced with a difficult choice. They can allow themselves to be emotionally blackmailed into 'keeping the peace' by not insisting on their rightful share. Or, if they choose to go ahead and file a case, they risk being tied up in litigation — with all its attendant costs in terms of time and money — that has no end in sight. Either way, injustice appears to be their lot. An amendment to make litigation over property time-bound would certainly address a significant loophole in inheritance issues.

According to the Supreme Court's most recent fortnightly case disposal report, there are 51,852 cases pending in the apex court, while the total backlog in the country's courts amounts to approximately 2.16m. One way to reduce the pendency rate is to appoint more judges. There are 3,067 judges presiding over the caseload in the district and high courts, while 1,048 positions are yet to be filled; the apex court has 17 judges, with two judges' positions vacant. These vacancies must be filled as soon as possible. Moreover, as was done during former Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's tenure, double shifts can be instituted for judges to hear cases. In May 2019, the apex court began hearing cases through video link connectivity for the first time; this method must be scaled up from its present limited use. Civil proceedings, which comprise the major portion of the courts' backlog, can be expedited if the judiciary sets its mind to it.

Electric motorcycles

THE recent launch of Pakistan's first electric motorcycle by Prime Minister Imran Khan underscores his government's strong push towards lower vehicle emissions led by the adoption of electric vehicles as part of its EV Policy 2020-2025 approved last year. The policy, which gives a slew of tax incentives to EV manufacturers, is targeting a robust EV market having a 30pc and 90pc share in passenger vehicles and heavy-duty trucks and buses by 2030 and 2040. The premier termed the launch as a futuristic step, saying that the push for electric mobility is part of the larger initiative of making the country clean and green. Indeed, the support for greater and early adoption of EVs is increasing ever since electric vehicles entered the limelight following the announcement of the EV

policy and the arrival of Chinese automotive manufacturers in the Pakistani market.

There can be no two opinions that Pakistan should play its part in mitigating the climate impact of vehicular emissions. But, at the same time, the larger goal of promoting cleaner transportation should not let the increasing enthusiasm for the potential of EVs or their public appeal affect the policymakers' capacity to appreciate such important issues as safety concerns, range anxiety, disposal of batteries, etc involved in the production and adoption of electric motorcycles powered by low-speed lead-acid batteries instead of high-speed lithium-ion batteries. Though the use of the former, which are easier to procure and cost-effective, will help the manufacturers keep the price of their products low, it may result in higher running costs owing to frequent battery replacements. The lead-acid battery powering two-wheelers, the primary source of mobility for middle-class families across Pakistan, make business sense for investors. But the government should be mindful that China was forced to change its policy in 2019 to move towards international safety standards, after years of junk production, and phase out electric motorcycles powered by lead-acid batteries owing to their low capacity and efficiency, depth of discharge and reduced lifespan. In India, electric motorcycles make up only a negligible fraction of its two-wheeler market. The market share of the ones powered by lithium-ion batteries is even smaller because of the higher battery cost. Unless there is a breakthrough in battery technology, electric motorcycles are unlikely to replace their internal combustion engine counterparts. Till such time, we may only see a negligible transition towards electric two-wheeler mobility.

ODI whitewash

A CATASTROPHIC ODI series whitewash at the hands of a third-string England side should pave the way for some serious introspection by the Pakistan players, team management and the Pakistan Cricket Board.

Pakistan were dismal, outclassed in every department by England, who were forced to name an entirely new squad just days ahead of the series after some players in the initial squad tested positive for Covid-19. The only signs of some fight from Pakistan came after the series had already been lost, in the third ODI

on Monday, where captain Babar Azam and the other batsmen finally hit form and got in the runs. Pakistan's batting had been blown away in the first two matches and despite posting the highest total against England at Edgbaston, it was the bowlers who came up short on Monday.

There can be excuses made, most notably that Pakistan's training sessions in England, following their quarantine period, were affected by rain. But still, it raises questions about whether the players, coaches including Misbah-ul-Haq and Waqar Younis, and the selectors are doing justice to their jobs of carrying the hopes of an expectant cricketing nation.

Days before the team's departure for England, Younis Khan, the team's batting coach, quit and his absence was sorely felt as there was no one to address the batting woes after Pakistan meekly lost the first ODI.

The team now has to rebound quickly with the Twenty20 series starting this week against an England side back to full strength with most of their big-name players returning from coronavirus-enforced isolation. It's a series of significance and will show where Pakistan stand heading into the T20 World Cup later this year. With increasing calls for heads to roll, anything other than a win in the T20 series will ratchet up the pressure on the coaching staff. However, that shouldn't overshadow the underwhelming ODI performance or discount the fact that it is time for some deep soul-searching while identifying and rectifying, at all levels, the areas where decision-making has been found wanting.

Taliban advance

THE Afghan Taliban are on the march, capturing territory inside Afghanistan as the government in Kabul fumbles to respond and Western forces in the beleaguered country count down the days till their 'mission' concludes and they can board the last flight home.

This situation means that the 'Islamic emirate of Afghanistan' may very soon become a reality, bringing with it associated challenges for Afghanistan's neighbours — particularly Pakistan — as well as the larger international community. In fact, the battle between Kabul and the Taliban is practically being waged at Pakistan's doorstep. On Wednesday, the Afghan Taliban captured the town of Wesh opposite Chaman, removed Afghanistan's national flag and raised

their own standard. This ritual is being repeated across Afghanistan as the Taliban have captured several other border crossings.

In this grim scenario, the options for Pakistan are limited. Clearly, this country wants to dispel the impression that it wants a Taliban government in Kabul. In fact, efforts are afoot to organise a conference on Afghanistan in Pakistan over the next few days and a number of Afghan politicians have reportedly confirmed their attendance, though it is unlikely that President Ashraf Ghani will attend. The fact is that it is in Pakistan's best interest not to play favourites in Afghanistan. If Pakistan is seen as favouring a Taliban dispensation in Kabul, it will isolate this country globally. Moreover, a Taliban 'victory' in Afghanistan will embolden their ideological comrades in Pakistan, including the banned TTP, and will create a logistical and training hub for anti-Pakistan militants across the border.

Ideally, a negotiated settlement is in the best interest of Afghanistan, as well as its neighbours and the global community. If Afghanistan slips back into chaos, the repercussions for all will not be positive. Already refugees have started heading for Tajikistan and if the situation deteriorates, the trickle may develop into a flood that all of Afghanistan's neighbours will have to face. Pakistan has made efforts to dilute the Taliban's hard-line views, but it is unlikely the group is listening. The last time the Taliban took power, in 1996, Pakistan was one of three countries in the world to have recognised that dispensation. This time all regional states must make efforts to prevent a collapse of order in Afghanistan.

The Taliban as well as representatives of the Afghan government were in Tehran recently to talk peace, and it is hoped the scheduled conference in Pakistan will also be attended by all sides so that a way out of the abyss can be found. However, while outsiders can try, the ultimate responsibility for bringing peace to Afghanistan lies with the Afghans themselves. Unfortunately, over the last few decades Afghans have largely failed to settle matters peacefully, and have chosen the battlefield to decide issues. At this point, it appears as if the same violent route will be taken.

Uncivilised politics

THE quality of political discourse in our country has plunged to a new low. In the current climate of toxicity, lawmakers, ministers and prominent politicians don't think twice before uttering profanities, striking one another and using disgusting

language be it on the floor of the National Assembly or on the set of a TV talk show. The remarks of Minister Ali Amin Gandapur at an election rally in Azad Kashmir this week fall into this category of shameful discourse. Mr Gandapur's vitriol and derogatory labels for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif show how far our political leaders will go to discredit their opponents. In our highly polarised political environment, criticism is no longer constructive. It is personal and nothing is off limits. Political opponents treat each other like enemies, and deliberating in good faith is increasingly becoming a rarity. Mr Gandapur's words reflect the divisiveness that the current leadership has injected into politics. His words have triggered protests from the opposition parties, yet the PTI has largely fanned the flames, by either justifying the minister's comments or embellishing them. Instead of trying to resolve this problem, the ruling party is reinforcing it — a trend that is seen among its senior leaders as well as less prominent politicians. The government must realise the cost at which this polarising politics will come. By using such tactics, and viewing politics as a blood sport, our leaders are letting down the people instead of rendering the public service that is required of them. Such antagonism against political rivals will promote intolerance within society as well, something we witnessed in the Daska by-election. With a general election scheduled in two years, the leaders of all political parties should know that hateful rhetoric and toxic speeches can trigger political violence.

Decency must return to politics, otherwise our already polarised society will continue its descent into political chaos. The ruling party must take the lead in setting the tone for mature politics, and base criticism of its rivals on substance rather than resorting to name-calling and personal attacks. It cannot continue to laud and reward such behaviour. By deploying these tactics, politicians appeal to their voters but do little to solve their problems. Healthy debates and criticism are hallmarks of a democracy. Sadly, there is no sign of either in our political discourse. Our political leaders should correct themselves before we reach a point of no return.

Dangerous water supply

SOME half a dozen deaths of people infected with *Naegleria fowleri* — the lethal 'brain-eating' amoeba that thrives in freshwater sources — has prompted the Pakistan Medical Association to issue a warning to the public to take preventive

measures. In the past few days, at least six people have died from this deadly illness, all of them in Karachi. One of the victims hailed from Balochistan while the rest were from the city. Though the number of deaths are relatively small, the PMA representatives fear that the actual number may be much higher since many cases tend to go unreported. *Naegleria fowleri* is usually found in freshwater reservoirs, such as those built for supplying water to domestic consumers, and is transmitted when contaminated water goes up the nose during ablution, washing or bathing. The amoeba enters the brain, causing meningoencephalitis, and is fatal in 95pc of cases. Symptoms can include body ache, high-grade fever, drowsiness, fainting and coma.

The PMA is right to raise the alarm since the emergence of cases indicates that the city's water supply is not adequately chlorinated, putting a large number of people at risk at a time when a pandemic is already testing their resilience. According to a recent report of the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board, 70pc of pumping stations supply water with either no chlorine or very low levels of it. The samples were collected from hydrants, reservoirs at University Road and Kidney Hill, two functional Dumlottee wells and pumping stations. This report belies the claim of KWSB officials that chlorine evaporates from the water supply lines. The authorities must immediately act on the warning of the medical authorities. Chlorination of water reservoirs is a relatively simple and cheap task that needs to be executed without any delay to prevent further loss of life from a lethal infection. If they do not, the number of cases will only grow in a city whose healthcare resources are already stretched to the limit.

Routine vaccination

A RECENT survey of countrywide routine immunisation coverage has revealed some encouraging results. According to the Third-Party Verification Immunisation Coverage Survey, around 76pc of children in the country younger than two years have been administered the full dose of initial vaccinations under the country's Expanded Programme on Immunisation. This is an increase of around 10pc in the number of fully vaccinated children in the last three years. In 2018, as per the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, the percentage of fully vaccinated children below the age of two years was 65pc. Of the remaining children, nearly 18pc have been immunised partially while almost 6pc have not been administered any kind of vaccine. The immunisation survey also shed light on

regional disparities in vaccination coverage. Punjab had the highest coverage with 90pc of children under two receiving full doses of initial vaccines, followed by 89pc in Azad Kashmir, 68pc in KP, 61pc in Sindh and 38pc in Balochistan.

Indeed, the improvement in routine coverage is significant and will go a long way in lessening the number of deaths among young children in the country. Despite considerable improvement, Pakistan's infant mortality rate still remains relatively high, with 67 children out of 100,000 dying before their fifth birthday. According to the federal health ministry's own figures, around 17pc of these deaths can be prevented by increasing routine vaccination coverage. The EPI offers free of cost vaccination for children till the age of 15 months. Vaccines for 11 illnesses — polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, tuberculosis, tetanus, haemophilus influenza type B, hepatitis B, diarrhoea, pneumonia and typhoid — are administered to children at a large number of EPI centres across the country. One hopes that the health authorities including EPI officials will keep up efforts to maintain this improvement and further increase vaccination coverage in areas where it is lacking most — Sindh and Balochistan — so that more children can be saved from infectious diseases that have been eradicated in most of the developed world.

Chinese targeted

THE terror attack which led to the death of Chinese nationals and locals in Dasu is yet another reminder that the threat of militancy is ever present.

The government was hasty in dismissing the incident as an accident initially. Its first statement said the Chinese workers had died after a bus plunged into a ravine owing to a mechanical failure. It made no mention of terrorist activity and refrained from clearly saying where the team was working. Later, a statement from the Chinese embassy shared more details; the team was travelling in a bus belonging to a Chinese shuttle company and was en route to a construction site of the Dasu Hydropower Project in KP when the blast took place.

The Dasu Hydropower Project includes the construction of a 4,320MW hydropower plant on the Indus River in Kohistan. The main civil contract works are reportedly being performed by a major Chinese engineering company. It was later learnt that an explosive-laden car rammed into one of two buses carrying Chinese workers. Though the bomb was not detonated with full force, the driver

of the second bus tried to swerve, lost control and the vehicle plunged into a ravine.

The Chinese embassy warned Chinese citizens and enterprises in Pakistan “to stay on alert” and to avoid going out unless necessary. It is unfortunate that the government did not issue a clear statement at the start. Clarity in communication is vital, especially when it comes to an important ally like China.

This is not the first attack on a Chinese target in the country. In the past, Chinese projects and staff have been targeted at multiple sites across the country. Chinese nationals and those working on Chinese projects have been targeted both by Baloch militants and the Pakistani Taliban. While the prime minister has expressed an interest in holding talks with insurgent groups in Balochistan, the grievances of those in the provinces where there are Chinese projects and workers are real and must be addressed through an effective strategy.

Mr Khan has also vowed to probe the Dasu attack and protect Chinese nationals working in the country, but the internal and external security decisions in the coming days, especially in the wake of a deteriorating regional situation, will really show what more can be done to improve security.

With the region on the brink of chaos as Nato and the US exit Afghanistan, all manner of militants will try and increase attacks inside Pakistan as is already evident. There is a dire need for improved security and intelligence gathering — not just for foreigners working in the country but also for ordinary Pakistanis. Pakistan has incurred an incredibly high human and economic cost due to years of unrest and militancy. The return of this threat could take Pakistan back to the era of uncertainty and strife.

Housing concerns

THE State Bank has said that housing and construction finance has increased by 75pc to Rs259bn during the last fiscal compared to the previous year. The bank says that 97pc of the overall target set last year has been met, and has termed the growth as unprecedented in the nation’s history. That may be true. But is the increase good enough for improving home ownership? With the government’s interest rate subsidy programme that allows first-time home buyers to purchase mortgages at 3pc, 5pc and 7pc, and the State Bank’s instructions to banks to

boost their construction and housing finance to 5pc of their total private-sector loans by December, consumer financing for house building has increased by Rs18bn to a paltry Rs97.8bn in the first 11 months of the fiscal to May. Such subdued growth numbers underscore both supply and demand side constraints on expansion in the mortgage market.

On the supply side, it is commonly known that mortgages are a new area for commercial banks that are also reluctant to entertain loan seekers with a poor, or with no, payment history, or with inadequate finances and income levels unless foreclosure laws are toughened to allow them to repossess the property of defaulters without the judiciary's intervention. Then, there also is a massive supply gap of affordable housing for low-middle-income, first-time buyers. On the demand side, the majority of those wanting to build or buy a house do not have access to banking services. Or their saving capacity is too low to allow them to look for mortgage. Those who have financial resources either operate in the informal economy or prefer not to obtain bank loans to buy a house. Housing needs, especially in the urban and peri-urban areas, are increasing rapidly and require very large volumes of investment if demand is to be met and the backlog of an estimated 10m units covered. The State Bank claims it is trying to tackle the issues hampering faster growth in housing loans, especially for the low-middle-income segments, but there's little hope of a major breakthrough in the near term. In a market where banks prefer to invest in secure government debt or do business with large corporations with deep pockets, they are unlikely to expose themselves to new risks. One way of boosting the country's mortgage market would be to encourage the establishment of specialised housing finance companies and disbursing subsidised housing credit to people through them.

Tashkent exchange

A FROSTY exchange between Prime Minister Imran Khan and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani during a conference in Uzbek capital Tashkent has brought to the fore Kabul's unjustified claims regarding Pakistan's role in the Afghan imbroglio. Mr Ghani had talked of Pakistan's "negative role" in his country, alleging that 10,000 militants had slipped into Afghanistan from Pakistan.

Separately, in another dubious claim the Afghan vice president had alleged that the PAF had provided air support to the Afghan Taliban during clashes between

Kabul and the insurgents at Spin Boldak. These claims were denied by the Foreign Office. Regarding Mr Ghani's outburst, the prime minister rightly pointed out it was "highly unfair" of the Afghan leader to heap the blame of Afghanistan's implosion on Pakistan.

It is unfortunate that the Afghan president chose to air such controversial views at a multilateral gathering. It appears that as the Western-backed Kabul government crumbles, Mr Ghani and others in his circle are choosing to deflect the blame for their failures towards Pakistan. Frankly, Mr Ghani is appearing more hawkish towards Pakistan than some of the openly pro-India Afghan politicians. An Afghan peace conference scheduled in Pakistan was also postponed on the request of Ashraf Ghani. While the Kabul government and the Taliban continue talks in Doha, the chances of a coalition government in Afghanistan appear quite slim. However, political players in Kabul must realise that Pakistan's input in the process will be vital, even if this country's influence over the Taliban has diminished considerably. Considering its geographical, historical and cultural proximity to Afghanistan, Pakistan cannot be left out of the Afghan equation.

Blaming Pakistan for the failures of Kabul — as well as the failures of the Afghan government's Western patrons — is blatantly unfair. After all, the question of why the US and Nato, the world's most powerful military machine, were unable to completely dislodge the Taliban and other insurgents despite occupying the country for two decades remains unanswered. Perhaps Ashraf Ghani and the anti-Pakistan hawks in Kabul can answer this better.

After spending hundreds of billions of dollars, and losing thousands of lives, the US and its allies have clearly lost the Afghan war, and America's protégés in Kabul are in no position to blame Pakistan, especially when the Afghan army itself is incapable of defending the country. While mistakes might have been made when Pakistan had recognised the Taliban after the 1996 takeover — along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE — this time around it seems that the government is pursuing a more balanced Afghan policy. The top civil and military leadership of Pakistan has said this country does not want to play favourites in Afghanistan. Therefore, instead of blaming Pakistan for its woes, the Kabul government should work with regional states to try and hammer out a solution before Afghanistan collapses into complete chaos yet again.

South Africa riots

SOUTH Africa has seen intense violence over the past week, as rioters have run amok looting and pillaging, with the government sending in around 10,000 troops to quell the disorder. The apparent trigger for the violence, said to be the worst since the apartheid era, was the sentencing of former president Jacob Zuma, who was given 15 months in a contempt of court case. However, it appears as if the roots of the violence lie much deeper than just the sentencing of the charismatic, and controversial, former head of state. Over 100 people have been killed while the violence has centred in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Perhaps one of the key factors behind the rage is the high unemployment rate in South Africa — above 32pc as per one figure — as well as the continuing health crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has added to economic woes.

It was only in 1994 that South Africa ended the vile system of apartheid that had created a segregated society based on colour and ethnicity. White South Africans, many of them descendants of European colonisers, sat on top of the totem pole despite being in the minority while members of the black majority toiled away, subjected to deplorable, degrading laws that practically gave them subhuman status. It is this abhorrent system that Nelson Mandela successfully campaigned against. However, nearly 30 years down the line while there have been advances, it appears Mandela's dream of a more equal — economically, socially, politically — nation remains unfulfilled, as reflected in the recent violence. Despite being one of the continent's major economies, South Africa remains plagued by crime, inequality and corruption. While it is true that creating a more equal nation after nearly five decades of apartheid is not an easy task, the ANC that rules South Africa, along with other political players, needs to make more of an effort to ensure economic justice is done, and the rule of law remains supreme in the country.

Growing Delta threat

WE are back to the brink of a Covid-19 disaster. With just over 4.5m citizens in the country fully vaccinated, millions more are vulnerable to the dangerous virus. The Delta variant — known to be up to 60pc more transmissible than other

strains — is spreading like wildfire across cities. The occupancy rate for oxygen beds in Gilgit, Skardu, Karachi and Muzaffarabad is 58pc, 50pc, 41pc and 33pc respectively. Being the most densely populated city, Karachi's Covid cases are growing on the heels of the reopening of indoor dining and gatherings. The decision by the provincial government to announce a new closure is sensible, but it was unwise to allow such gatherings given that large swathes of the population are unvaccinated. In Gilgit and Skardu, where tourism has seen an uptick, cases are exploding. These areas have a much weaker healthcare infrastructure than bigger cities, which means that the number of beds and critical care units with ventilators available to sick patients is far lower. In the AJK capital, where political rallies are in full swing ahead of next week's election, cases are steadily rising. These are all ominous signs. Not too long ago, the world watched aghast as a similar situation unfolded in India, only to plunge the country and millions into a Covid-19 nightmare. Religious festivals, political rallies, denial of the virus, and an overall devil-may-care attitude towards the pandemic crippled India, harming both lives and livelihoods. It was a cautionary tale for everyone in South Asia who mistakenly believed that a young population, heat and miracle immunity would somehow provide protection. Those myths have been long shattered.

The government must proactively work on both immunisation, daily tests and prevention to protect the country from plunging into a disaster. The vaccination drive must be sped up, as just over 6pc of the government's target of 70m people have received both jabs. As Eid approaches, the message from both the federal and provincial governments should be to stay indoors and limit the spread of the virus. Smart lockdowns should be imposed in infection hotspots. The national positivity ratio has crossed 5pc, and it will continue to rise given what we know about the high transmissibility of the Delta variant. The public messaging should remind citizens how foolish it would be to ignore SOPs, and that, if precaution is not taken now, a lockdown will have to be imposed to prevent all-out doom.

Women workers

WOMEN make up almost half the country's population. But they form a very small part of the workforce with Pakistan ranking second to last for them in leadership roles.

Women's participation in the labour force is actually declining as it dropped from 23.8pc in 2016 to 22.2pc in 2020, and is well below the rates for countries with similar income levels, signifying a major loss of productivity and implications for women's empowerment. Compared to that, the labour force participation rate for men is 82.5pc, indicating one of the highest gender gaps in the labour force participation rate. Even women seeking employment are mostly unable to find jobs, or are paid roughly 34pc less than men as per the Global Gender Parity Report. There also is a big gender gap in the unemployment rate, which represents men and women actively looking for employment. That makes Pakistan comparable with some Arab and African economies where women are discouraged to step outside the home for paid work.

Pakistan's low female participation in the workforce is the opposite of global trends. The world average gap between male and female labour force participation rates has been declining as countries try and empower women through better-paid employment and ensure their contribution to economic growth and prosperity. Consider the example of Bangladesh where women working in garment factories — almost 90pc of labour employed by that country's apparel exporters is female — have played a crucial role in growing their economy and alleviating poverty. In Pakistan, women account for just 15pc of the total workforce of the apparel industry.

Increased women participation can impact an economy significantly. It helps reduce income inequality, alleviate poverty, boost girls' education etc. Women's access to education, finance and transportation can help increase their independence and participation in the labour force.

Recently, the OICCI, which represents foreign companies operating in Pakistan, urged the government and businesses to make efforts to increase female participation in labour and management roles in all key segments to at least 25pc by 2025 in line with the SDGs by providing women equal opportunity, protection against workplace harassment and building inclusive workspaces. It recommended awards for "spotlighting outstanding women business leaders and mandating equal pay for equal work by adopting gender-neutral compensation and benefit structures" besides giving tax credit for organisations with women at the management level beyond a set threshold. These goals may appear easy to achieve. But they are not.

Pakistan's political milieu, social set-up and laws still keep women out of the workforce and tied to unpaid work at home and in farms, in addition to providing loopholes to employers to discriminate against female workers. A lot needs to be done to change the way society looks at working women, including making and implementing laws to end workplace harassment and discrimination against women, and promote an inclusive, gender-equitable labour market in the country.

Transparency needed

THE Planning Commission is so frustrated with the workings of one of its attached departments, the National Logistics Cell, that it has suggested to the Cabinet Division to place it under the control of the communications ministry. This information came out in a meeting of the public affairs committee in which the secretary of the Planning Commission expressed his inability to "rein in" the NLC because it did not share details even about audit-related paras in meetings of the departmental accounts committee. The secretary also admitted that the NLC management was unable to explain its position over audit paras and that the NLC neither observed procurement rules nor did it safeguard public money. In the PAC meeting it also emerged that the NLC had apparently given out some contracts worth millions of rupees to single bidders without advertising it according to rules.

These are serious charges and deserve to be explained in detail by the NLC, especially since it was admitted that two officials had been dismissed because of them. The NLC is a taxpayer-funded organisation and therefore it must display standards of transparency and accountability that apply to all government organisations. It is disappointing that matters have come to such a stage where the supervising department — in this case the Planning Commission — has to express its inability to enforce rules and demand answers from the NLC. The public has a right to know what is the mandate of the NLC, and why it feels that it does not have to share its financial details with the supervisory authorities. It should be a matter of concern for the government that the NLC is providing scant information for the departmental accounts committee as is the norm for all other official bodies. The secretary of the Planning Commission has done well to raise this issue at the PAC so that higher authorities can take note and order remedial action. The secretary has also informed the defence ministry and it is expected that the NLC management will now cough up the answers it has been so

reluctant to share. This is yet another test case for the PTI government that claims to have made transparency a cornerstone of its governance. The Prime Minister's Office may want to look into the matter raised by the Planning Commission and resolve it so that the NLC starts behaving like an accountable organisation that it is.

Sindh heritage sites

DOUBTLESS for an under-resourced, developing country such as Pakistan, putting money aside for what are considered 'non-essential' expenditures is a tough ask. It is not surprising that matters of culture and the preservation of heritage end up on the back-burner. Even so, it is essential to remember that these are the very lynchpins that connect the country's bright future — as claimed by government — with its rich, tapestried history. That these sectors remain inadequately addressed by the state is all the more shocking given that the current government makes much about its dedication to 'soft power' concerns such as tourism, environment and heritage. Thus, when last week, the Sindh Minister for Culture, Tourism and Antiquities Syed Sardar Shah said that "I will not beg for alms from the federal heritage ministry", the bitterness betrayed by his choice of words was regrettable beyond measure.

Mr Shah made these remarks in Hyderabad, after inaugurating the century-old Mukhi House recently renovated as a museum. Accusing the federal government of having completely overlooked Sindh in terms of the conservation of some 3,200 heritage sites, he said that the funds due to the province by the federal heritage ministry had not been released for a long time, and that the centre had denied Sindh its due share in the NFC Award. Despite this, he said, the provincial government was trying its best. That said, he also dilated upon the challenges being faced, referring in particular to the Pucca Qila. This dates back to about 1768, constructed during the Talpur rule over Sindh, and has by now, according to the minister's estimate, some 80,000 to 100,000 people settled on its premises. True, culture and heritage have been provincial matters since the 18th Amendment, and Sindh has no doubt been lax in matters of preservation. But that does not absolve the centre of its responsibilities in all sectors. Mr Shah's words serve as a warning that without serious efforts, there will be nothing left of the past to preserve.

FDI decline

THE worrisome, sharp decline in the more permanent, non-debt-creating foreign direct investment, or FDI, should be a cause of concern for the government's financial team. FDI inflows shrank by a hefty 29pc to \$1.85bn, or equal to just 0.6pc of GDP, during the last fiscal from \$2.6bn a year before, the new central bank data shows. The Covid-19 health crisis, that has gripped much of the world, has been a factor in the reduction of FDI inflows to Pakistan, but blaming the pandemic alone will not help since the plunge in investment is not a one-off event for the country. While there may be some improvement in sight in the bigger economic picture, Pakistan has been struggling to attract long-term foreign private capital ever since Chinese investment under the multibillion-dollar CPEC initiative began to dry up following the completion of large power and transport infrastructure projects. In fact, China still remains the largest investor in Pakistan, according to State Bank data, in spite of a decrease in inflows from its companies and banks. The investment inflows from Western economies to Pakistan have, nevertheless, declined more drastically despite decades of trade and political relations with the US and the European nations.

There are several reasons such as the threat of terrorism, macroeconomic instability, political volatility, energy shortages, etc that have kept foreign investors from bringing money into Pakistan in the past. But a major factor keeping foreign investors away is the country's lack of integration with the regional and global economy, as well as inconsistent economic policies. The decreasing volume of FDI from the country's traditional trade and economic partners is also reflective of a decline in political ties with the West. Therefore, we have seen FDI inflows to Pakistan decrease over the past two decades against the global trend of investors rushing to developing countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam, etc. The FDI inflows are important to keep the pressure off the country's balance-of-payments situation and plug depletion of the central bank's foreign exchange reserves by strengthening the financial account of the State Bank. Besides, FDI encourages technology transfer, improves business management practices and brings competition in the market. For an economy the size of Pakistan, how difficult would it be to attract FDI? Yet we can hardly expect foreign investors to bring their money to Pakistan unless we consistently pursue investment-friendly economic policies and become part of the global supply chain.

Another tragic accident

ALMOST every other week, if not every other day, newspapers report deadly road and rail accidents. It has been barely over a month since 65 people died in a horrific collision between two passenger trains near Rohri. Now, yesterday's deadly road accident is in the headlines. At least 30 lives were cut short, and over 40 people were badly injured when a passenger bus collided with a truck on the Indus Highway near Dera Ghazi Khan. The bus was en route to Rajanpur from Sialkot, most likely transporting blue-collar workers and their families home for the Eidul Azha break. In May, 13 passengers perished when a bus overturned near Rohri in Sindh. Similarly, in April, 12 passengers died and 20 more were injured when two vehicles collided on the Mehran National Highway near Kot Diji in Sindh.

Where yesterday's accident is concerned, although Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar has promised to launch an inquiry and catch those responsible, it is not likely that the deaths will lead to any change in the way officialdom views such accidents. So many 'inquiries' of other road accidents are lying forgotten. With such a high ratio of totally preventable road crashes, one wonders what it will take for the authorities to awaken from their stupor and take steps to regulate the transport business, including interprovincial travel, and crack down on owners of rundown, dangerous vehicles and inexperienced and careless drivers. Such circumstances are no less than a recipe for disaster. Mere expressions of sympathy by those in authority are not enough to assuage the grief of the victims' families. One hopes that in this case, and in other instances, the government goes beyond superficial measures and the usual platitudes to actually improve travel safety in the country. The reason why its current lackadaisical approach is not witnessed in any country that values its citizens is that the authorities follow up on investigations and heads roll once responsibility for a tragedy has been fixed.

New blow for Pak-Afghan ties

THE unfortunate episode involving the daughter of Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan has taken a new twist with the police saying that the impressions created by her claims of abduction have not been corroborated by their

investigations though a final conclusion will only be reached once the investigators can have full cooperation from the family.

In a press conference on Monday that was also addressed by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and National Security Adviser Dr Moeed Yusuf, the IG Islamabad Qazi Jamilur Rehman said the police had traced the taxi drivers who had taken her from Islamabad to Rawalpindi and back and had also mapped out her route by scanning CCTV camera footage. The foreign minister added that he would wait for the final conclusion of the investigation before saying anything further, while the national security adviser said a smear campaign against Pakistan was being choreographed on social media from abroad.

The entire affair has put Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan under strain as Kabul has recalled its Islamabad embassy staff for the time being. This comes at a crucial time with the US about to complete its exit from Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban stepping up their offensive against the government of President Ashraf Ghani.

Pakistan has been working feverishly to broker a power-sharing arrangement so that Afghanistan does not descend yet again into civil war. In this regard, Prime Minister Imran Khan is hosting a conference in Islamabad for important leaders from Afghanistan shortly. The foreign minister has done well to restrain his rhetoric about the allegations of the Afghan ambassador's daughter and the government has also taken the correct proactive approach by extending full cooperation in investigating the matter.

However Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid has, unfortunately, been less careful with his words. While talking to a TV channel, he made some irresponsible statements about these allegations being a conspiracy against Pakistan. Even if the details are murky and the investigation so far is suggesting something contrary to what has been stated, the interior minister should have remained tight-lipped till everything was clear. His undiplomatic utterances are harmful to Pakistan and Prime Minister Imran Khan should have a firm word with him.

The Islamabad police need to build a watertight case around their final conclusions because the stakes could not have been higher. It is heartening to hear that the police has dedicated a large number of investigators to the case and they have traced crucial details about what transpired that day. The complainants should also now fully cooperate with the police so that all loose

ends can be tied. The Kabul government should have waited for the final investigations before taking the drastic step of recalling its staff from Islamabad. It should see reason and avoid further vitiation of the situation. This would be in both sides' interest.

India's admission

AFTER India's deplorable revelations, it is a positive sign that Pakistan's determination to meet FATF requirements has not gone unnoticed by others. For instance, the US has said it supports Pakistan's efforts to meet the global financial watchdog's conditions and acknowledges that this country has made "significant progress" on the original action plan.

The State Department encouraged Pakistan to complete the remaining actions "expeditiously" in the second action plan. The US statement is significant as it comes in the wake of India's public acknowledgement that it had ensured Pakistan remained on the FATF grey list. India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, claimed in front of a gathering of BJP leaders that India had successfully put pressure on Pakistan. A spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Islamabad has responded to these disturbing claims by saying this had exposed India's "true colours" and "duplicitous role".

It was no secret that India had been manoeuvring behind the scenes to ensure that Pakistan remained on the grey list despite this country's impressive progress in fulfilling FATF requirements. But the acknowledgement by the Indian minister not only brings New Delhi's negative role out in the open, it also casts a shadow over decision-making within the FATF itself. While it may not suggest that FATF decisions are all political, it does provide a peek into how countries try to influence these decisions not on merit but on the basis of their political priorities.

The Indian minister's admission — brazen as it is — is proof enough that Pakistan may have, as suspected, been faced with shifting goalposts in terms of being judged for its actions. The FATF had announced on June 25 that Pakistan would continue to remain on the grey list until it addressed the single item on the original action plan that is still to be implemented as well as items on a parallel action list that was handed out by the watchdog's regional partner the Asia Pacific Group. With Pakistan having made such appreciable progress in its actions, the July 25 decision was rather unexpected. Given this situation, the

least that the FATF must do is to take stern notice of the Indian minister's statement and admonish New Delhi for bringing the FATF into disrepute. If a perception is created that countries are settling scores using the FATF platform, then this will adversely impact the credibility of the international watchdog and undercut the mandate that it says it carries.

In the meantime, Pakistan should continue to progress on the remaining, important agenda item and take action against senior leaders of UN-designated terror groups. Pakistan has benefited by strengthening its existing laws and legislating new ones to fulfil FATF requirements and it should ensure effective implementation of these laws. The FATF should also acknowledge Pakistan's efforts, despite the malicious manoeuvring by countries like India, and move swiftly to strike Pakistan's name off the grey list.

EU headscarf ban

EUROPEAN states have long professed a commitment to the separation of church and state, as well as allowing people to live according to their beliefs. However, a series of events over the last few years has raised legitimate questions about how far this commitment really goes. The latest amongst moves contrary to the spirit of tolerance has been a ruling from the EU's top court that allows employers to ban female workers from wearing the headscarf while on the job in order to present an image of "neutrality".

While the court has left it up to the judiciaries of the individual member states to determine the "general need" of employers in calling for the ban, the ruling sends the wrong message nonetheless, especially at a time when the far right is gaining ground across Europe. Instead of strengthening European secularism, the ban will fuel divisions based on culture and religion. As a spokesman for the Turkish presidency said, the decision "is an attempt to grant legitimacy to racism".

Europe claims to be the bastion of so-called Enlightenment values, but its record, particularly in the 20th century, of treating the 'other' is not a good one. The Holocaust instantly springs to mind, while the treatment meted out by European colonisers to people of colour in Africa — the French in Algeria, the Belgians in Congo — does not inspire confidence. Therefore, moves by the EU to curtail the religious freedoms of Muslims and others in the bloc need to be reviewed.

It is not just Muslims that are facing rising xenophobia in Europe. For example, Jews have been attacked for wearing religious headgear while the EU court has also backed a Belgian decision to effectively ban halal and kosher meat by calling for animals to be stunned before slaughter, which is in conflict with Islamic and Jewish teachings.

The fact is that many states in Europe are pandering to right-wing populists in targeting the cultural and religious practices of immigrants and European residents of non-white backgrounds. While some restrictions, for example the niqab ban, are based on cogent concerns, as questions of confirming identity arise, what great security threat does a woman worker in a hijab pose, or someone eating halal or kosher meat, for that matter? Either the EU should endeavour to ensure justice for all regardless of national origin or religion, or admit to the fact that some within its borders are less equal than others.

Disposal of offal

WITH the observance of Eidul Azha, questions of hygienic removal of animal waste after the sacrifice in Pakistan also arise, as solid waste disposal, especially in urban parts of the country, is problematic. In most cities, animals are slaughtered and their remains are left to rot on streets and garbage heaps, unless proficient local government agencies move in quickly to clean up.

In Karachi, the nation's biggest city, over the past few years there have been mixed results where removal of sacrificial animals' offal is concerned. During the Musharraf era, local governments acted relatively quickly before the rotting remains created serious health hazards. However, after this LG system was wrapped up service delivery has deteriorated steadily, with offal being picked up in some locations, while in others it is left to rot for days on end.

While the municipal organisations cannot be let off the hook for lack of performance in this regard, most people also display a distinct aversion to civic sense. For example, after the sacrifice on the roadside or outside homes, the least people can do is to make an effort and dump the entrails in designated areas where the municipal authorities can easily cart it away. Perhaps the most ideal option would be to slaughter animals in designated locations, helping ensure a hygienic and mess-free sacrifice. But old habits die hard and the state as well as religious and community leaders will have to encourage this trend.

As mentioned above, the solid waste disposal system in most Pakistani cities, particularly Karachi, leaves much to be desired. However, when it comes to Eidul Azha, when large quantities of animal waste are left in open spaces, the need to clean up quickly to prevent health hazards is particularly acute. Moreover, the threat of bird strike also exists, as avian scavengers scoop down for the 'goodies', creating hazards for aircraft. Therefore, local bodies across the country will need to be on their toes to ensure a safe and hygienic sacrifice.

Prisoners' return

THE families of 62 Pakistani prisoners who had been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia had reason to rejoice this Eid as their loved ones returned home earlier this week. These 62 returnees had been languishing in Saudi jails and were able to come home because of Prime Minister Imran Khan's special intervention. According to news reports, the prime minister arranged for funds for their return via a special flight on Tuesday. Indeed, this was a laudable step taken by Mr Khan and it must have given hope to thousands of other Pakistani prisoners in Saudi jails. There are over 11,000 Pakistanis imprisoned in foreign jails. The bulk of the prisoners are incarcerated in jails in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. A number of these prisoners are blue-collar workers who get ensnared in drug smuggling rings and are sentenced. They often do not speak the local language and are unable to understand the crimes they have been charged with, in addition to being stuck in a foreign criminal justice system without any consular representation or legal help. For many of these prisoners, the possibility of being reunited with their families is a distant dream.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman had promised to release 2,107 Pakistani prisoners when he visited the country in February 2019. This pledge was followed by the release of nearly 580 Pakistani prisoners by Saudi authorities under royal clemency in October 2019. Earlier this year in May, Islamabad and Riyadh signed a prisoner transfer agreement for the repatriation of over 2,000 Pakistanis in Saudi jails. One hopes that the prime minister will continue to pursue the matter of repatriation of the remaining prisoners languishing in Saudi as well as other prisons abroad. He should also ensure that the Foreign Office enhances its consular presence in countries where Pakistanis are said to be jailed, in order to aggressively pursue the cases instituted against

these prisoners so that at least those who have been unfairly charged or committed minor offences can come home.

Cyberattack on rights

A COLLABORATIVE investigation into a data leak of software sold by the Israeli surveillance company NSO Group has led to some hair-raising revelations. The company has sold Pegasus, malware that is used to conduct cyber surveillance, to authoritarian governments who want to spy on journalists, activists, politicians and government officials.

The software can infiltrate iPhones and Androids, enabling the operator to record calls, retrieve photos, messages, and emails without the knowledge of the phone user. Though the company claims it only sells its software to those who want to use it against terrorists and criminals, a massive data leak from its records shows its clients may have used it against targets who fall into neither of those categories. The leak contains the phone numbers of 50,000 individuals, and a forensic analysis of some devices has shown traces of the Pegasus malware.

At least 10 governments are believed to be NSO clients, including Saudi Arabia, India and the UAE. The phone numbers in the leak span 45 countries — including Pakistan, where a number once used by Prime Minister Imran Khan was targeted for potential surveillance. The government is now investigating whether Mr Khan's device was in fact infiltrated.

Spyware like Pegasus facilitates human rights violations, especially when in the hands of authoritarian regimes. A government or intelligence agency can use the software to spy on dissidents and critics — a dangerous and worrying reality in countries where privacy and human rights are routinely flouted. It can also be used by hostile countries to spy on rivals in a new era of cyberespionage. The fact that the list of phone numbers in the data leak is linked to individuals who evidently do not have criminal or terror links speaks volumes for how this spyware is being abused. It is also a test for phone manufacturers and app developers to come up with improved protection. Although it is virtually impossible for any device to be totally bug-free or hacker-proof, both iOS and Android developers should invest in research to improve security.

It is important that the international community come together to regulate the use of such tools and curb the violation of human rights. Governments must pressure global rights bodies to monitor countries that develop and sell this software. The export of such surveillance technology should either be stopped or heavily regulated to prevent abuse. One step towards this is the consortium itself. Much like the Panama Papers investigation, a group of journalists shed light on Pegasus' clients and their requests. This story gives hope that countries can work together on the basis of a similar template to stop the abuse of fundamental rights when it comes to digital surveillance and cyberespionage. Until such companies can demonstrate that they can respect human rights and limit abuse of their software, their widespread sale should be restricted.

Sleeper cells

THERE was a time not too long ago when militant groups had unleashed a reign of terror in Pakistan, resulting in widespread bloodshed across the country. It took the combined efforts of the military, police and civil administration to counter the menace of terrorism; the fight was taken to militant sanctuaries in the erstwhile tribal areas, while many facilitators in the cities were also neutralised through intelligence-based operations. Now, as the situation deteriorates in Afghanistan and a hostile, pro-Hindutva government sits in New Delhi, Pakistan will have to remain on guard to prevent the re-emergence of terrorist outfits within its borders. In a recent interview given to a local TV channel, the ISPR spokesman hinted at the threat posed to the country by terrorist groups' sleeper cells. In particular, Maj-Gen Babar Iftikhar mentioned the possibility of subversive activities in Balochistan. He added that since May, KP and Balochistan had witnessed around 150 terrorist incidents. Moreover, the possibility of terrorist involvement in the recent Dasu bus tragedy cannot be ruled out.

What happens beyond Pakistan's borders is not in this country's control. However, the situation within Pakistan can surely be monitored to ensure that the threats from terrorist outfits are countered before militants can carry out acts of mayhem. "We are conducting proactive and aggressive operations" against militants, the military's spokesman had said. Indeed, this is the way to proceed, before terrorist groups get a chance to activate their cells. The authorities need to take intelligence-based action against suspects to pre-empt acts of terrorism. There is little doubt that jihadi and sectarian groups — many of whom have kept

a low profile over the last few years — will be emboldened if an Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul materialises and they may activate themselves in Pakistan. Therefore, the state must keep a vigilant eye on the ‘usual suspects’ known to foment religious and sectarian hatred and that have in the past openly challenged the state, its Constitution and its institutions. As for hostile foreign actors, their activities should also be watched closely and the message to their handlers abroad must be clear: Pakistan will not tolerate activities designed to foment lawlessness within its borders. The administration and the civilian and military security agencies must coordinate their plans and actions to confront the terrorist threat. It is imperative that hostile, non-state actors be apprehended before they are able to spill innocent blood once again in this country.

Noor murder case

IT would not be an exaggeration to describe Pakistan as no country for women. This truth was underscored yet again earlier this week when the discovery of the bloodied, headless corpse of Noor Muqaddam shook the nation to the core.

The brutality of the murder, and society’s utter shock, notwithstanding, it is likely that this tragedy, like countless other anti-women crimes, will become just another statistic in a long list of patriarchal sins. Indeed, Noor’s case will be a test for the authorities in more ways than one. It is not simply about ensuring a strong prosecution team, foolproof evidence and a fair trial with a conviction and exemplary sentence being handed down to the perpetrator — something that is sorely missing in our criminal justice system. It will also be a test for prosecutors, investigators and witnesses to withstand the lure of money or the fear of clout that those who want a safe way out for the perpetrator may wield.

Meanwhile, the greatest test for society itself will be to look inwards and ask how we arrived at this point. How did the family of the suspected murderer, Zahir Jaffer, who has a possible criminal history that is said to have led to his deportation from the UK, not keep a vigilant eye on him, especially if he was mentally unsound as is being claimed? Indeed, it is dumbfounding that the suspect reportedly worked as a mental health counsellor at one controversial therapy clinic, where he received treatment. Was there complacency that his wealth and social standing would rescue him from any situation? Even one as

horrifying as this? We have seen this sense of entitlement before in the Shahzeb Khan murder case some years ago. More recently, we have seen it in the early release of the man who stabbed Khadija Siddiqui 23 times in broad daylight in 2016.

Unfortunately, it is the second-class citizens who suffer most — and women in this country define that description. The fact that they are allowed to ‘exist’ at all may be some kind of a miracle given that practically every gender comparison shows the immense gap that exists between males and females. And the socioeconomic indicators are only the practical manifestations of a national opinion that sees women as unequal, sometimes as chattel, not important enough to be protected but fit enough to be blamed for all the atrocities they attract towards themselves.

Independence option for Kashmir

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has reminded the people of Jammu & Kashmir that once they have acceded to Pakistan after the UN-mandated referendum in light of the UN Security Council resolutions, Islamabad would grant them the right to an independent status if a majority so desired. Speaking to a campaign rally in Azad Kashmir two days prior to the elections, he also brushed aside allegations by the opposition that his government was planning to convert AJK into a province. Mr Khan’s statement on the independence for Kashmir has elicited a strong reaction from his political opponents. Leader of the Opposition Shehbaz Sharif, in a statement issued on Saturday, said the prime minister’s utterance deviated from Pakistan’s historical and constitutional stance, adding that any attempt to impose a solution on Kashmiris without their will and consultation would amount to a betrayal of the Kashmir cause.

This is not the first time that Mr Khan has issued such a statement on Kashmir. Back in February, on the occasion of Kashmir Solidarity Day, he had also reminded Kashmiris that Pakistan would not stand in their way if they opted for independence after accession to Pakistan. Then too the prime minister had been bombarded with criticism for injecting the ‘third option’ into the Kashmir dispute whereas the UN resolutions only talked about the option of Kashmiris either joining Pakistan or India. Such criticism is not surprising in the acute polarised political environment, but it is entirely misplaced. There is nothing wrong in what

he said. In fact, he appears to have given this statement deep thought as well as due legal diligence. His statement draws strength from the Pakistani Constitution. Article 257 of the Constitution clearly states: "When the people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir decided to accede to Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and that State shall be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of that State." This leaves little room for ambiguity. Mr Khan's statement is fully compliant with the Constitution and is in fact timed well to send a message to the people of India-held Kashmir and AJK that Pakistan will respect their right of self-determination.

The prime minister's statement is also a welcome reaffirmation of the fact that Pakistan does not see the Kashmir dispute as a conflict over territory, but in terms of the UN-mandated right of self-determination for the people of the state. At a time when India is trying its best to erase the Kashmiri identity by revoking the state's special status and engineering demographic changes, it is commendable that Prime Minister Khan has reiterated Pakistan's principled position in clear terms and assured the Kashmiris that while Pakistan is a party to the dispute, it is the Kashmiris who will have the final say both in the referendum and afterwards.

Rental inflation

HOUSE rent prices soared in June by 6.21pc from 4.2pc a year ago, topping the list of 10 contributors to the urban Consumer Price Index during the last month of the previous fiscal. The other major contributors to the urban CPI, according to the monthly Inflation Monitor published by the State Bank, included motor oil, electricity, food, etc. The surging rent prices indicate the increasing gap between housing demand and supply in the cities amid changing family structures and a growing urban population. The trend also reflects the increasing cost of real estate and construction in recent months, affecting the rental housing market in the urban centres as renters demand a higher return on their investments. The increasing rents mean that urban housing is now turning into a major crisis for city dwellers, especially those living and working in places like Karachi and Lahore.

The rising rents have major implications for the broader price inflation since rents are tough to control without more housing. After all, when people don't own

homes they will have to rent a place to live. It is, therefore, safe to assume that housing inflation will keep climbing as the economy picks up and more middle-class families look for rented shelters. According to most estimates, the country is facing a shortage of at least 10m housing units, mostly in the cities. The backlog is increasing by around 350,000-400,000 units per annum. Although the government has announced a slew of generous tax and regulatory incentives for developers and builders besides offering interest rate subsidies to first-time homeowners on bank loans to encourage new investment in housing, the project has been slow to pick up. In spite of the central bank's instructions, banks are reluctant to lend to most applicants owing to the latter's lack of payment history or other reasons. To control rent inflation, the government needs to push those who have used the incentives to whiten their illegal money and invest heavily in housing.

Senior citizens' law

FOR all the cultural emphasis on respect and consideration for our elders, the state itself extends little by way of assistance to its senior citizens. With the signing of the Senior Citizens Bill, 2021, by President Arif Alvi, that shortcoming is being addressed to a certain extent. The legislation, which applies to Islamabad Capital Territory alone, includes a number of welcome initiatives. It stipulates the setting up of a Senior Citizen Council to formulate policy proposals and the establishment of old age homes for the indigent, deserted and homeless among the elderly. ICT residents 60 years and above are now eligible for senior citizen cards, which will give them free access to museums, parks and libraries. They will also be entitled to concessions in medical and dental services and diagnostic and laboratory facilities, as well as to subsidised medicines. Given that medical expenses are a major concern for those of advanced years and have a profound effect on their quality of life, the new legislation goes into appropriate detail on this score. Financial assistance will be given to the deserving among this age group, and they can avail of 20pc subsidy on air and railway travel. The legislation can also help where the elderly have transferred property on condition that the transferee provide them the basic facilities of life, but find this condition not being met. In such cases, a competent court can, if the transferor so wishes, declare the transfer void.

While one hears much about Pakistan's 'youth bulge', there is rarely a mention of citizens in their twilight years. Even health professionals specialising in geriatric medicine are few and far between, and it is about time that changed. With average life expectancy in this country increasing from 51 years three decades ago to 60.9 years today, the cohort of over-60s is expanding steadily and the state must take them into account while formulating policy. The general expectation is that families themselves will take care of their elderly, and many do. But economic pressures are increasing, even more so as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, with more and more families getting pushed into poverty. Increasingly, one hears of desperately sad cases where old parents are abandoned by their children and left to fend for themselves in dire conditions. Here the state must step in and ensure that senior citizens can live out their remaining years in dignity, rather than feel themselves to be a burden on their families.

Society should also change its ageist outlook that can lead to poorer mental health among the elderly. Being on the 'other side' of 60 should not preclude opportunities to travel, learn new skills and lead a rewarding life. This ICT-specific legislation is a good template for the provinces to follow suit and lend their senior citizens a helping hand.

Grim Covid realities

YET another grim milestone was reached last week when we became the 30th country in the world to mark a million coronavirus cases. In Karachi, alarm bells are ringing as cases shoot up. Reports suggest the positivity ratio has crossed 20pc — a shocking statistic which suggests that at least one out of every five people tested in the city gets a positive result. There are reports of people testing positive despite having been fully vaccinated, and though most have escaped serious illness or hospitalisation, this spells fear for the unvaccinated and how they will fare if infected with the widespread Delta variant. The Sindh government has announced the closure of restaurants and marriage halls, recreational spots and educational institutions to flatten the curve of positive cases. Additionally, it has decided to add 300 new beds to high-dependency units where critical Covid-19 patients will be admitted, a move which highlights the rapid rate at which those infected are seeking hospital treatment. Unfortunately in Gilgit-Baltistan, where the chief minister said the Delta variant is spreading and the positivity rate

is 8.5pc, no lockdown or curbs have been announced. The poor healthcare infrastructure in this region, coupled with the influx of tourists in the summer months, may spell doom if the authorities do not rethink their strategy.

Less than 7m citizens have been fully vaccinated, which means that most in the country — even young people as was witnessed when the Covid-19 wave crushed India — are vulnerable to serious illness. Given this reality, the general attitude towards the virus within the government and members of the public is shockingly laid-back. Until late last week, mass gatherings continued unabated in AJK, where scores of people were crammed next to each other — many without masks — to attend campaign rallies. The heads of all political parties, including the prime minister, led these gatherings, almost as if the threat of Covid-19 was entirely absent. This approach is a terrible mistake, and one that, if the Delta variant continues to spread at this rate, would have come at a huge cost. What is more disappointing is that the government has not ramped up testing more than a year after the pandemic began. A total of 44,579 tests were conducted in the country on July 24 — an exceedingly low figure given the size of the population and the spread of the virus. If messaging and testing are not improved, and vaccination remains slow, Pakistan will enter a Covid-19 disaster.

Islamophobia envoy

BY calling for the appointment of a special envoy to counter Islamophobia, American lawmaker of Somali origin Ilhan Omar has raised a pertinent issue at a time when anti-Muslim incidents are on the rise in many countries. In a letter to the American secretary of state calling for creating such a position, the Democratic lawmaker from Minnesota has said it must be recognised that “Islamophobia as a pattern ... is repeating in nearly every corner of the globe”.

Ms Omar has singled out China, India and Myanmar as state actors responsible for “violations against ... Muslims”, while also calling out white supremacist groups for spreading anti-Muslim hate.

Ms Omar has herself been the target of anti-Muslim abuse in her own country; the outspoken lawmaker has faced online abuse, including from other American legislators. In fact, Donald Trump, while in the White House, told her and other progressive Democratic women lawmakers of colour to “go back” where they came from.

Islamophobia has taken many ugly forms across the globe. In Europe and North America far-right groups have indulged in anti-Muslim violence, deadly in some cases, emboldened by demagogues and populist politicians looking to grab a few votes by demonising the other. Meanwhile in India, Hindu zealots have lynched Muslims for eating beef, knowing they can get away with their crimes as the state is sympathetic to their hateful ideology. Myanmar and Sri Lanka have also seen incidents of mass violence against Muslims, often instigated by extremist sections of the Buddhist clergy.

Therefore, an effort on the global level against Islamophobia is clearly needed. Instead of the US taking the lead — as it may punish geopolitical enemies such as China and look the other way when friends such as India persecute Muslims — perhaps the effort should be led by the UN. Prime Minister Imran Khan has raised the issue of Islamophobia at the multilateral body, and it is through the combined efforts of the international community that the menace of anti-Muslim hate can be confronted.

AJK's ugly elections

As widely expected, the PTI has won a comfortable majority of seats in the Azad Kashmir elections brushing aside the challenge from both the PPP and PML-N. Prime Minister Imran Khan will now nominate a prime minister for AJK from among two hopefuls whose names have been doing the rounds in party circles.

By winning the election, the PTI has upheld the tradition of the ruling party in Islamabad forming the government in Muzaffarabad. It has enough reason to be satisfied with its performance and Prime Minister Imran Khan is justified in giving his team a pat on the back. Yet, there are problems.

As election campaigns go, this was one of the ugliest in recent times. The tone and tenor of speeches, the intensity of partisan attacks and the level of personal mudslinging was, to say the least, abominable. All party leaders focused on insulting their rivals instead of talking about issues concerning the AJK electorate. These leaders brought their animosity and mutual loathing into the AJK arena and polluted the air with their toxic brand of politics. They had no qualms about relegating the issues of Kashmir into the background and highlighting instead what they considered the most damaging aspects of their

rivals' politics. Charges of treason were bandied about callously and allegations of a 'sellout' of the Kashmir cause were flung without any substantiation.

This reduced the campaign to the level of a street brawl. It was sad to see cabinet ministers resorting to violent and sexist rhetoric and PML-N leaders peddling anti-Semitic language to tarnish their opponents. If this were not bad enough, election day too saw a flare-up of violence and the usual charges of electoral malpractices. The PML-N and PPP have both pointed to what they call rigging in various forms even though the PPP has bagged a respectable number of seats. There will be a few days of accusations and counter-accusations but at the end, the government formation in Muzaffarabad will ensue and a PTI nominee will take oath as the prime minister.

It should, however, be of concern to the collective political leadership that the AJK polls have once again shown — if ever more evidence was needed — that the system in place is incapable of producing an election that can be accepted by all stakeholders. The responsibility for this failure is shared by many players: the AJK Election Commission for being unable to enforce transparency and credibility, the police and local administration for failing to secure life and property, and the political parties for not acknowledging the weakness of the system and showing the will and capacity to reform it. A bigger disaster awaits us if these multiple failures are not addressed meaningfully. The general elections are two years away and if they are conducted like the AJK ones, we are in for serious trouble.

Refugee concerns

AS Afghanistan slips back into chaos with a rapid Taliban advance, the possibility of refugees spilling over into neighbouring states is becoming stronger. Pakistan, which has hosted millions of Afghans over the past four decades and counting, is rightfully concerned at the prospect of having to accommodate a new wave of displaced Afghans as its western neighbour descends into fully fledged warfare. According to reports, due to fighting over the past month, more than 22,000 families have fled Kandahar, the former Taliban stronghold. As the deputy governor of Kandahar province put it, "the negligence of some security forces, especially the police, has made way for the Taliban". This basically sums up the dilemma of Afghanistan; as the Western-backed Afghan government's security

forces are unable to defend their country, the Taliban are scoring victory after victory, with Kabul's foreign friends having lost interest in the Afghanistan theatre. While earlier, Afghans had fled to Tajikistan to escape violence, considering Kandahar's closeness to Pakistan, this country may well be faced with a new influx. This is despite the fact that the state has made clear that it cannot host more Afghan refugees. The foreign minister has indicated this more than once. However, the truth is that as unready and unwilling as Pakistan is for a new wave, it may have to face one anyway if things get worse in Afghanistan. The state has said it will not refer to fresh arrivals as 'refugees' but as 'externally displaced Afghans'.

The fact is that beyond changing the nomenclature of Afghan refuge-seekers, the state must be ready for the worst-case scenario. Some media reports quote Pakistani diplomats in Afghanistan as saying that around 1m people may be affected by the post-US exit violence, while a government committee has estimated that between 500,000 to 700,000 people may be headed to Pakistan in case of conflict. In such a scenario, keeping the new arrivals in camps near the border seems to be the best option, as allowing more refugees into the cities will cause major security and economic problems. If such an eventuality occurs, the international community must work with Pakistan to help feed and house displaced Afghans. Meanwhile, the Americans should stop their bombing campaign and instead push the Kabul government to hammer out a peace deal with the Taliban. In the absence of such an arrangement, the fallout for Afghans as well as neighbouring states will be grim.

ECP vacancies

FEARS of yet another deadlock between the PTI government and the opposition on the selection of successors for retiring ECP members from KP and Punjab loom large with no signs of the constitutionally required consultations between the two sides. Under the Constitution, the prime minister is required to initiate consultations with the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly for jointly recommending a panel of three consensus nominees per vacancy for confirmation of one of them by a parliamentary committee. In case there is no agreement, the prime minister and opposition leader are supposed to separately send three names each to the committee having equal representation from the treasury and opposition benches. The law mandates that no ECP position should

stay vacant for more than 45 days. But past experience shows that the issue of new appointments may linger for a longer period.

In the recent past, for example, we have seen the ECP becoming virtually non-functional because the government wouldn't engage with the opposition on filling the vacancies. The appointment of the ECP members from Sindh and Balochistan took more than a year because the prime minister was not willing to engage with the opposition leader. The government also unsuccessfully tried to bypass the constitutional mechanism for the appointment of commissioners. In the past, disagreement between the then PML-N administration and the PTI opposition had resulted in the unlawful appointment of three members to the ECP. The failure of politicians to fulfil constitutional responsibilities because of their inability to rise above parochial positions speaks volumes for the deepening political polarisation in the country. It is time that politicians learnt from their past mistakes and started to engage with one another on national and constitutional matters as is the case in other democracies. The onus of initiating consultations with the opposition is on the prime minister. At the end of the day, it is he who will have to take much of the responsibility if there is delay in new appointments.

Door-to-door jab

THE Punjab government's move to take its coronavirus vaccination drive to the doorsteps of people in five high-risk districts of the province is a commendable initiative given the significant public hesitation against inoculation. The campaign launched on Monday aims to vaccinate at least 40pc of the population above 18 in the four districts — Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala and Multan — and 70pc in Rawalpindi by Aug 14. The targeted districts account for the most virus infections and deaths in Punjab, and, hence, the need to step up the vaccination effort. It is too early to say if the government will succeed in achieving its inoculation targets in the said cities. But the initial signs are quite encouraging. It is also being hoped that the government will extend this initiative to other parts of the province, including rural areas, once it is done with the more vulnerable cities.

With Pakistan among the 30 countries that have each reported more than a million Covid-19 infections, the people are already in the grip of the fourth wave of the pandemic with the positivity ratio spiking to around 12pc in the last few days. That the new wave is driven primarily by the more dangerous Delta variant

that spreads more easily than other strains, as has been evident in a number of countries across the globe, the only hope to halt or slow down its rapid transmission lies in vaccinating the maximum number of people since those individuals who have not been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 are most at risk. It, therefore, is essential that all provinces replicate the new initiative launched by the Punjab government to vaccinate people by going to their homes to vaccinate them in order to ramp up the pace of inoculation. Additionally, they must ensure compliance with social distancing guidelines and restrictions on crowded places. This is especially crucial in cities like Karachi and Muzaffarabad, which have reported the highest positivity ratio of 24.8pc and 19.76pc in recent days. Laziness can be as deadly as complacency.

Renewed threat of militancy

AS the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, the prospect of foreign militants relocating there from conflict zones elsewhere is becoming more likely. That development is certain to have a dangerous spillover effect in the region, particularly in Pakistan where signs of an uptick in militancy are already being felt.

According to the 28th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, prepared for the UN Security Council, so far there has been “only limited relocation” but it could increase “should the environment there become more hospitable to ISIL or groups aligned with Al Qaeda”.

The report also says that Al Qaeda is present in at least 15 Afghan provinces, and that in Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz provinces, its Indian Subcontinent chapter, or AQIS, “operates under Taliban protection” and consists mainly of Afghans and Pakistanis. If this is indeed the case, then the Afghan Taliban’s assurances to the US that they will not allow transnational Islamist outfits to operate from its soil cannot be taken at face value. Unlike the case with the militant Islamic State group, a comparatively new entrant in this conflict zone, the Afghan insurgents and Al Qaeda have had a mutually beneficial relationship which goes back decades. Those links have clearly endured and may even strengthen further.

It is also well known that the banned TTP has sanctuaries inside Afghanistan’s border areas, which neither the Afghan government — for strategic reasons —

nor the Afghan insurgents — for ideological reasons — have tried to disturb. The fact that the Taliban, despite Pakistan's support to them over the years, have never condemned any atrocity carried out by the TTP in this country should have been a telling indicator as to where their sympathies lay. As many analysts had long predicted, the 'strategic depth' policy is proving to have been a one-way street, affording the TTP space to regroup and replenish its ranks rather than bringing any discernible benefit to Pakistan.

The TTP was already in a resurgent mode after five splinter groups, including Jamaatul Ahrar and Hizbul Ahrar, returned to its fold some time last year in Afghanistan. The reunification, which may have increased the umbrella group's strength to 6,000 armed fighters, was overseen by Al Qaeda. Several attacks in Pakistan have been claimed by the TTP over the past few months, perhaps due in part to this development. Worse may follow if the Taliban manage to seize control of Afghanistan.

The only possible way out of a scenario that threatens the hard-won peace against militancy in this country and could plunge the region into chaos once again, is for all sides to engage with the Afghan Taliban. In return for the economic cooperation that Afghanistan desperately needs, they must demand that the Taliban give iron-clad guarantees of reining in international militant groups on their soil. Otherwise, Pakistan's worst fears may come true.

'Hepatitis can't wait'

WITH a large part of the world's health resources diverted towards fighting wave after wave of Covid-19, it is easy to forget about other viral diseases that are just as dangerous and that continue to take a heavy toll on lives around the world. For instance, at least one person dies of hepatitis-related illness every 30 seconds, according to the WHO. In Pakistan, there are between 12m and 15m people infected with either hepatitis B or C, while at least 150,000 new cases are reported every day. Independent data suggests that hepatitis B and C have proved far more lethal than Covid-19 so far, taking between 300 and 325 lives every day in the country. The actual number of infections may be far higher since a large number of cases go unreported. Unsafe medical practices and a poor system of sewage disposal and sanitation are responsible for the spread of all five forms of hepatitis in the country. While hepatitis B and C are transmitted

through direct contact with or transfusion of bodily fluid, such as blood, the other forms — A, D and E — are caused by consuming contaminated food and water.

Most patients in Pakistan become infected with hepatitis B and C at healthcare establishments, according to the WHO. The virus spreads through the transfusion of contaminated blood, improper sterilisation of surgical equipment and dialysis machines, the reuse of syringes by quacks and drug users, and the recycling of razors at barbershops. This speaks volumes for the negligence of the authorities who fail to penalise quacks and crack down on unsafe medical practices. Who can forget the 2019 HIV/AIDS outbreak in Ratodero, Sindh, where the reuse of syringes by a local doctor infected some 1,440 people, more than 1,000 of them children? Today, as the world observes World Hepatitis Day, the authorities should take a critical look at where they have gone wrong and address their lapses to reduce the prevalence of hepatitis in Pakistan. It is deeply unfortunate that Pakistan, despite producing affordable medicines to treat hepatitis C infections, has the highest hepatitis C prevalence rate in the world. The largest number of hepatitis C patients are in Punjab where 7pc of the population is said to be infected. 'Hepatitis can't wait' is the theme for this year's World Hepatitis Day, and the Prime Minister's Programme for Hepatitis must come up to expectations by ensuring nation-wide screening and establishing diagnostic centres.

Saudi FM's visit

THE Saudi-Pakistan relationship is decades old and has weathered a number of geopolitical storms. Of late, ties came under stress — over Yemen, Iran, and the Kashmir question — yet these disagreements have been handled through diplomatic channels without major damage to bilateral relations. On Tuesday, the Saudi foreign minister landed in Islamabad heading a delegation to meet his Pakistani counterpart, while later the Saudi side also met the prime minister and the army chief. The high-level visit indicates that despite the irritants, bilateral ties are on track.

While officially the visit took place to discuss economic and regional issues, it is difficult to say what specifics were discussed behind closed doors. It seemed the visit was designed to normalise ties, while the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan may also have come under discussion. After all, Pakistan and Saudi

Arabia were key members of the US-led grouping that fought the Soviets during the Afghan ‘jihad’, while Riyadh and Islamabad, along with Abu Dhabi, were the only three capitals that recognised the Taliban government after its takeover of Kabul in 1996. Therefore, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are likely keeping an eye on the Afghan theatre in order to evolve a common strategy. The fact is that both sides, as well as other Muslim states, should develop consensus on key issues affecting the Muslim world, especially Palestine and Kashmir. In fact, it was Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi’s outburst last year criticising the Saudi-led OIC over its inaction on Kashmir that caused ties to nosedive. It took visits by the prime minister and army chief to Riyadh to help smoothen matters. In his recent visit Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan mentioned the need to “work [together] on regional issues, whether it’s Kashmir, Palestine or Yemen”.

Pakistan must keep up its diplomatic efforts to maintain cordial ties with all states, specifically within the Muslim bloc, as well as the region. While Saudi Arabia is a traditional partner, Iran is a neighbour and shares cultural and historical links with Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan must work to build bridges between Riyadh and Tehran to the best of its ability. Saudi Arabia can also play a major role by raising a voice against atrocities meted out to the people of occupied Kashmir, considering its standing in the Muslim world. The Pakistan-Saudi relationship must be based on respect and mutual benefit. For example, ties hit a major low when Pakistan refused to join the Saudi-led war in Yemen. In hindsight, Pakistan made the right decision by staying away from the quagmire; in fact, the Saudis themselves are now trying to extricate themselves from the Yemen war. Pakistan must remain neutral within the Muslim bloc and try and build bridges between states in different geopolitical camps. Getting sucked into sectarian and regional conflicts is definitely not in its interest, something our ‘brothers’ must understand.

SBP’s high hopes

THE June spike in the current account deficit notwithstanding, the State Bank doesn’t look too worried about the gap between the country’s projected foreign payments and income getting out of hand during this fiscal. Announcing the monetary policy for the next two months on Tuesday, State Bank governor Reza Baqir said the bank expected the deficit to remain in the sustainable range of 2pc-3pc of GDP in FY2022. This is in spite of the likely growth in imports — though more moderately than in the previous year — on the back of robust

domestic recovery and rebound in global commodity prices. The bank is also hopeful that the forex reserves position will continue to improve owing to adequate availability of external financing. Its prediction of a manageable current account deficit implies that it considers the sharp sudden spike in the latter to \$650m and \$1.6bn in May and June nothing more than an aberration triggered by certain one-off imports.

The last fiscal was good insofar as the balance-of payments position was concerned. Even though the current account deficit started to widen in the second half of FY2021 because of growing imports, the year ended with the deficit equal to just 0.6pc of GDP, the lowest in a decade and easy to finance with elevated remittances. Reserves increased by \$5.2bn. The bank has noted that “Pakistan’s external position last fiscal was at its strongest in several years”. But that doesn’t mean all is well. In addition to the near-term likelihood of oil and commodity price volatility, medium- to long-term risks remain. The major threat comes from our inability to rapidly grow exports to finance the increasing import bill. Last year, exceptionally high remittances had come to the rescue of the government. What if these flows flatten or start sliding once Covid-19 travel restrictions are lifted? Also, successive governments have failed to make Pakistan an attractive destination for long-term, non-debt-creating FDI. Eventually, Pakistan has to depend on foreign currency loans to fill the gap and maintain forex reserves at a minimum threshold. No wonder the government and the State Bank are always looking to line up more debt from bilateral, multilateral and commercial sources even if they have to pay a financial and political price. The government should implement structural reforms to boost exports and FDI, as well as reduce its reliance on imported luxuries for longer-term external sector stability that is not built on borrowed dollars.

Joy and sadness on K2

TEENAGE mountaineer Shehroze Kashif continues to scale new heights. On Tuesday, the 19-year-old became the youngest person to summit K2, Pakistan’s highest and the world’s second highest peak, with supplemental oxygen. The feat followed his ascent of Mount Everest, the world’s highest mountain, in May. His achievement needs to be celebrated but the joy has been tinged with sadness — and some relief.

Shehroze reached the summit only a day after the remains of Pakistan's legendary mountaineer Mohammad Ali Sadpara, along with two climbers, were finally spotted in K2's 'bottleneck' — a narrow gully just hundreds of metres from the summit. Sadpara along with Ireland's John Snorri and Chile's Juan Pablo Mohr had been missing since February when they were attempting a summit in winter. The rescue had to be called off due to bad weather conditions. But Sadpara's son Sajid — who in 2019 became the youngest person to climb K2 at the age of 20 — became part of another expedition to find his father's body. Pakistan's Samina Baig was also attempting to scale K2 this week but had to cut short her expedition due to dangerous conditions.

Since the relaxation of Covid-19 rules this year, many foreign climbers have arrived in Pakistan which is blessed with some of the world's highest peaks. The mountain wilderness here has attracted tourists for long and Pakistan was once an essential stop on the 'Hippie Trail' before militancy in neighbouring countries saw a decline in the overland journey from Europe to South Asia. The 2013 massacre of 10 climbers at the Nanga Parbat base camp was another blow but foreign climbers have started coming back in the last few years.

Pakistan's mountains have a commercial value that remains untapped and Shehroze's ascent is a sign that the country's youth is also picking up interest in mountaineering. To keep that interest alive, it's imperative that the government take steps by incentivising the sport, and empowering the Alpine Club of Pakistan by providing funds as well as helping set up a professional mountaineering school.

Judge's elevation

A CONTROVERSY roiling the legal fraternity for a few weeks has come to a head. It was precipitated by the Judicial Commission of Pakistan's approval, by a 5-4 majority vote, of the elevation to the Supreme Court of Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar. The judge was fifth on the seniority list of the Sindh High Court and the decision has been met with a strong reaction from lawyers' bodies across the country who contend that the JCP is violating the criteria of seniority as the guiding principle for elevation. That criterion was set by the apex court itself through its judgements, notwithstanding that the court has also held that elevation to the Supreme Court be considered a new appointment. On a call by

the Pakistan Bar Council, lawyers across the country boycotted the courts on Wednesday. It does not appear that matters are going to settle down soon. The PBC has called a general body meeting of all provincial bar councils and associations on Aug 5 to chalk out a future line of action.

Several rulings of the apex court have expounded on the constitutional provisions related to the appointment of judges to the superior judiciary. The most exhaustive of these were the Al-Jehad Trust case and the Malik Asad case judgements that laid down the seniority principle to be followed in such appointments. In recent years, however, seniority has been disregarded several times. One of the judges who was superseded was the late chief justice of Peshawar High Court Waqar Seth, who headed the special court that found Gen Pervez Musharraf guilty of treason. Justice Seth had even filed a petition to say that in view of his seniority, he had a valid expectation to be elevated to the apex court.

Certainly, seniority as a criterion for promotion in any sphere is problematic. Merit-based appointments are the gold standard. However, Pakistan also has a history of machinations by the executive against the judiciary, including the way chief justices Sajjad Ali Shah, Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui and Iftikhar Chaudhry were removed, not to mention the recent reference against Justice Qazi Faez Isa. In such an environment, the process whereby such an appointment is made must also be transparent. If seniority is to be discarded as the guiding principle, then objective criteria to assess merit must be framed. These could include, for example, the disposal rate, number of judgements published in law journals, the ratio of judgements upheld/reversed by the apex court, the frequency with which their judgements are cited by other judges, etc. It is also worth pointing out that in recent years, the judiciary has set aside hundreds of out-of-turn appointments in the police and the civil sector, presumably on the grounds that bias of some sort could have been involved. Judicial appointments should not become controversial. The JCP must set a clearly defined path to elevation.

PTI's Sialkot win

THE PTI's victory in the Sialkot constituency PP-38 over PML-N is a significant development in all respects. This was considered a PML-N stronghold and therefore a safe seat for the party and its candidate whose family has dominated

politics in the area. Central Punjab is perceived as the PML-N's heartland and only a few months ago, the latter party had trounced the PTI in National Assembly by-elections in Daska.

In fact, the ruling PTI had lost successive by-elections reinforcing a perception that its incumbency was weighing heavy on it. However, the party's back-to-back victories in Azad Kashmir and Sialkot have given a fillip to its political standing while denting the PML-N.

There are numerous reasons why the opposition parties find themselves struggling against the government but one key reason is the lack of cohesion in their anti-government narrative. The PML-N's internal duality is a particularly acute factor that is dragging down the party in electoral contests. While the PTI has now started focusing on its projects and schemes, the PML-N is still running around in circles trying to figure out whether it wants to pursue an aggressive policy or a more prudent one. It is this confusion, or ambiguity, that has forced the PML-N to explain every defeat as a product of rigging without producing any convincing evidence to substantiate its claims.

This narrative gets diluted when confronted by inconvenient contradictions. When the PML-N wins a by-election, there is no mention of malpractice but when it loses, it cries foul. It may want to recognise that the PTI is slowly consolidating its political strength and setting itself up strongly for the general elections. This does not however mean that the tables have been turned. The PML-N remains entrenched in its Punjab stronghold and the PTI cannot be sure of the scale of its organic support in the largest province. It is also apparent that the establishment remains a central player in the system regardless of what the opposition parties may desire. The PTI's recent electoral victories are a reminder that the fundamentals of the political chessboard that was set in the 2018 elections remains in place to a fairly large extent. This presents a unique challenge to the PTI's rivals. They have to figure out a workable strategy to dent the PTI's political standing before the general elections are upon them. So far there are little indications that the opposition has anything new up its sleeve.

Attack on Chinese

AN attack targeting two Chinese nationals in Karachi on Wednesday should put the security apparatus on alert in order to neutralise such threats. The two

foreigners were attacked by armed motorcyclists while they were being driven to an industrial unit in the SITE area. Though one of the Chinese nationals, as well as the local driver of the vehicle, remained unhurt, the other was injured by the gunmen but was fortunately said to be out of danger. The banned Balochistan Liberation Front has claimed responsibility for the attack. The incident comes on the heels of the Dasu tragedy in which at least 13 people, including nine Chinese nationals, were killed in a terrorist attack. Moreover the Chinese consulate in Karachi had come under an armed attack — also carried out by Baloch separatists — in 2018.

It is obvious that these attacks are designed to harm the Pakistan-China relationship and to discourage foreigners from working on development projects in the country. Protection for Chinese nationals must be beefed up considering that hostile actors — including those belonging to separatist outfits that are backed by certain right-wing governments in the vicinity — appear determined to target them. The security apparatus must redouble its efforts to thwart such incidents. Following the Dasu incident, China was quite firm in demanding security for its workers, while it took efforts from the foreign minister as well as the army chief to assure Beijing that such violence targeting China's nationals and projects in Pakistan would not be tolerated. The fact is Chinese nationals — working on CPEC as well as other projects — are 'soft' targets for terrorists, which is why intelligence-based actions are the best option to prevent such attacks. The economic and strategic relationship between Pakistan and China is deep, and inimical forces should not be allowed to damage this bond. The intelligence apparatus must keep a close watch on elements that intend to do harm to China's nationals and Pakistan-China economic interests.

Reduction in polio cases

AFTER the long and tedious efforts of those running the national polio programme, there are signs that Pakistan might just be able to eradicate the crippling disease. With only one case of wild poliovirus reported so far this year, the hard work of Pakistan's polio workers, who walk from door to door in the face of rejection and threats to vaccinate youngsters, is finally paying off. It is even more significant that this progress has been made in the difficult era of Covid-19, when manpower and resources are difficult to muster, let alone manage. Last year, vaccination campaigns remained suspended for more than five months.

Despite that, the only wild poliovirus case surfaced in Balochistan while eight cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type-2 have been reported. In 2020, there were 84 WPV and 135 cVDPV2 cases. The relatively low number of cases and negative environmental samples indicate that the poliovirus is indeed on the wane. However, experts warn that this progress is fragile and could be reversed if vaccination efforts are halted or compromised. Pakistan was on the brink of eliminating polio in 2018. But a complacent attitude dominated the last push, leading to an aggressive resurgence of polio in 2019 that overturned previous gains.

So, the authorities should not pat themselves on the back just yet. On the contrary, now is the time to double down on vaccination efforts to make way for Pakistan's exit from the tiny club of two countries (the other being Afghanistan) where the disease remains endemic. With a national immunisation drive beginning on Aug 2 and aiming to vaccinate over 23.6m children, it would be a good idea for the authorities to simultaneously launch a robust information campaign to educate the public. As 179,000 polio workers put themselves at risk yet again by going from door to door to vaccinate our children, the government must also do its bit to persuade reluctant parents to comply for their children's sake. Hopefully, with consistent efforts, Pakistan can root out polio.

China-Taliban meeting

WITH the government in Kabul appearing to stand on very fragile foundations, and as the clock ticks down to the final withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban are asserting themselves diplomatically across the region.

The most recent diplomatic exchange took place in the city of Tianjin, where the Chinese government had invited members of the armed movement for talks. Indicating the importance of the meeting, the Chinese side was led by Foreign Minister Wang Yi, while the Taliban were represented by their number two, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Earlier, a Taliban delegation was in Iran to talk peace with the Afghan government, with the Iranian foreign minister playing host, while peace talks between both sides were also hosted by Russia.

While some have pointedly commented that the Taliban are being treated as a 'government in waiting' by regional powers, the truth is that in the cruel world of

geopolitics, states must hedge their bets and keep channels open with all players, however unpalatable. Moreover, it can be argued that it was the US — more precisely the Trump administration — that granted legitimacy to the Afghan Taliban by signing the Doha peace accords in 2020, which paved the way for the current foreign withdrawal. The fact is that in today's Afghanistan, the Taliban are the most powerful armed group, which is why foreign states are keen to engage the movement. The Chinese are obviously worried about Afghanistan becoming a haven for militancy again if the Taliban capture Kabul, with particular concern about Uighur fighters taking refuge in the country. Afghanistan and China share a short but inhospitable border. Other states have similar concerns.

According to a recent UN document, Al Qaeda is present in around 15 Afghan provinces, with Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent reportedly working under Taliban protection. Anti-Pakistan terrorists such as the TTP also maintain a presence in Afghanistan as do Central Asian militants and members of the IS-Khorasan 'chapter'. Therefore, if central authority collapses in Afghanistan, the possibility of all these unsavoury groups getting a free hand to carry out their operations becomes quite distinct. And here questions about the Afghan Taliban's intentions begin to arise. Has the group learned a lesson from the American invasion and sworn not to provide sanctuary to foreign Islamist fighters? Or will the Taliban, fired up by the zeal of global 'jihad', once more become an accessory to global terrorist groups? Some answers may emerge in the weeks ahead.

Foreign states must continue to hammer home the message that militancy based out of Afghanistan will not be accepted, while it should also be communicated that religious freedom and women's rights must be assured. It is up to the Taliban to choose the path forward. They can either try and enter the mainstream, or stick to their mediaeval worldview and risk isolation from regional states and further conflict within Afghanistan.

Outages in Makran

IT is no surprise that people in Balochistan's Makran Division have of late taken to the streets to protest in the sweltering heat, and blocked the coastal highway linking this neglected region with Karachi. Far away from the centres of power, this was perhaps the only option they had to draw the government's attention

towards the hours-long outages that they, their families and businesses have been suffering on a daily basis for the past month. This is not for the first time that the residents of Makran Division, comprising Gwadar, Kech and Panjgur, find themselves without power for 16 to 18 hours a day. For almost a month in 2018, they lived without electricity for most of the day. However, no efforts have been made during the last three years to mitigate, let alone end, the travails of the impoverished and politically dispossessed 1.4m residents of this region — because the nation’s policymakers appear to believe that the massive investment required for tackling the issue would not prove profitable.

At the heart of the problem lies successive governments’ failure to connect these districts with the national grid or build power generation plants to directly supply electricity to the residents of this border region. Even the 300x2MW coal-fired power plants planned by a Chinese firm for Gwadar, the country’s deep-sea port often referred to by politicians as the jewel of the multibillion-dollar CPEC project, remains blocked by bureaucracy. Resultantly, people continue to depend on an erratic supply of 100MW of electricity imported from neighbouring Iran. According to Minister for Energy Hammad Azhar, the government has taken up the issue of reduced electricity supply with the Iranian envoy to Islamabad. The supply is likely to improve over the next few days. But that is not a sustainable solution for the power woes of this area. Iran itself is facing power shortages and it cuts or reduces the export of electricity to the coastal areas of Pakistan to cater to the needs of its own population. The long-term solution lies either in connecting the region with the national grid or investing in local generation projects to answer the growing demand for electricity in this area. One hopes that the government does not wait for yet another crisis and a new wave of street protests to take action. The state can strengthen its deteriorating link with its citizens only by responding to and resolving their problems in a timely fashion.