

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March 2020

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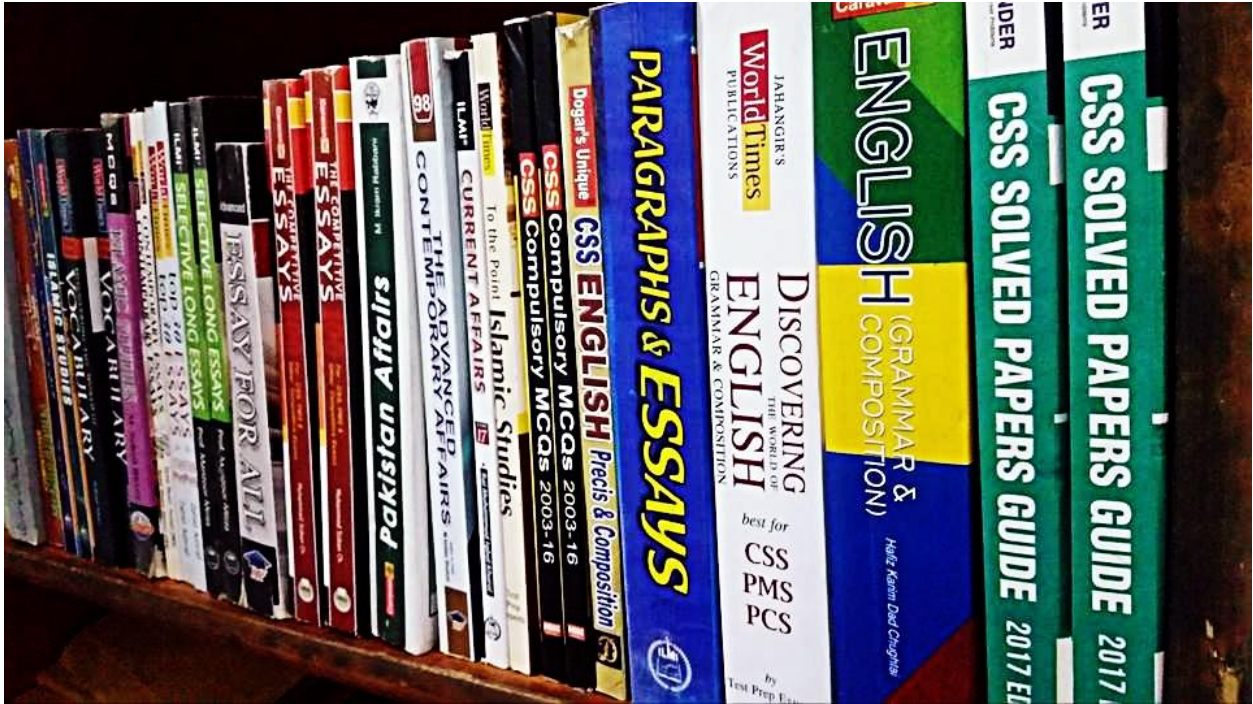
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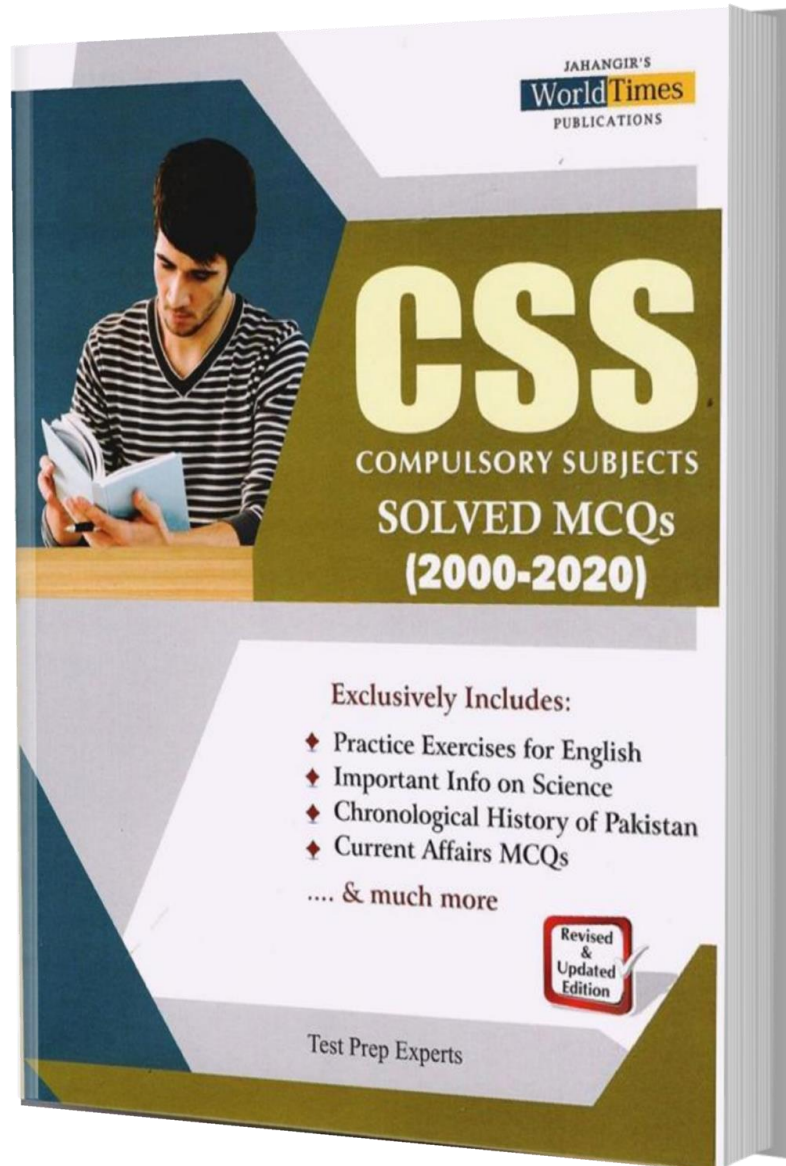
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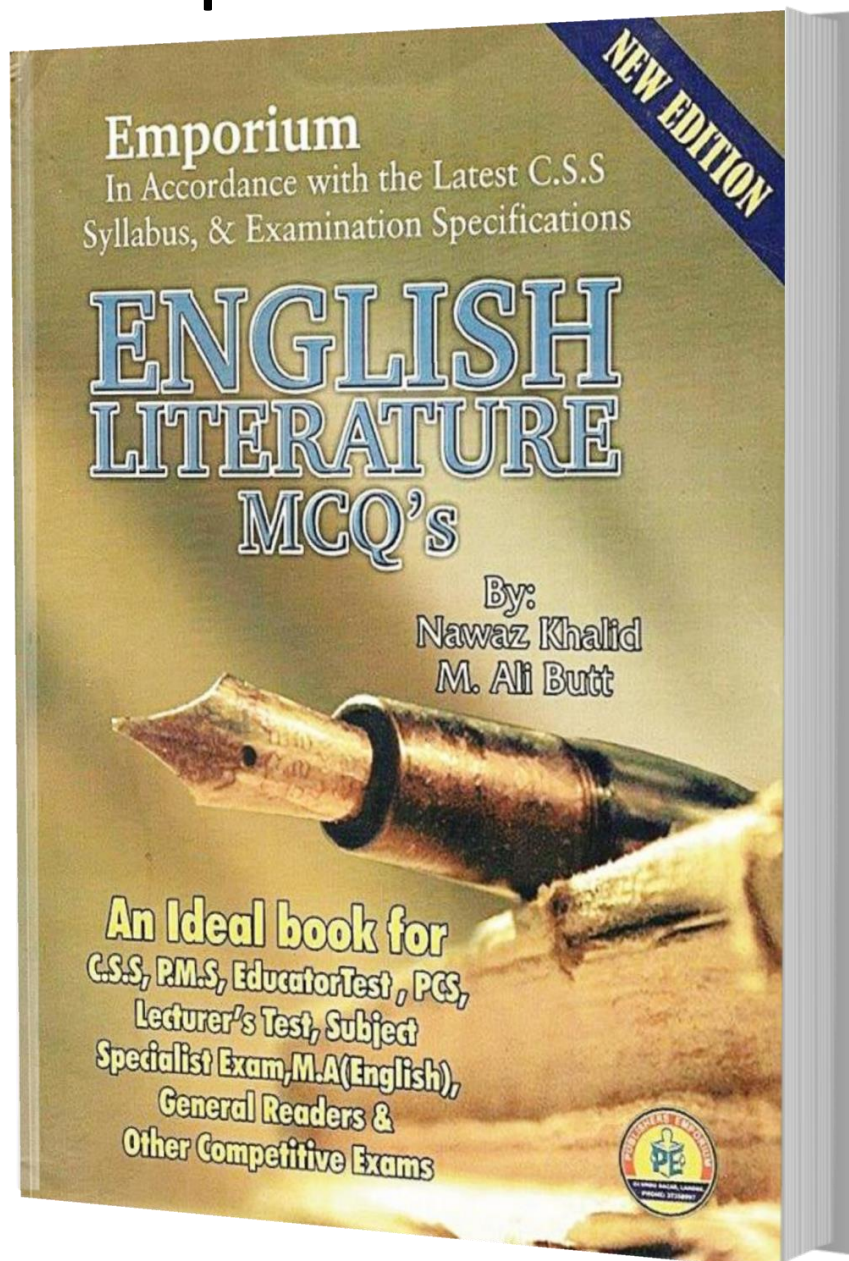
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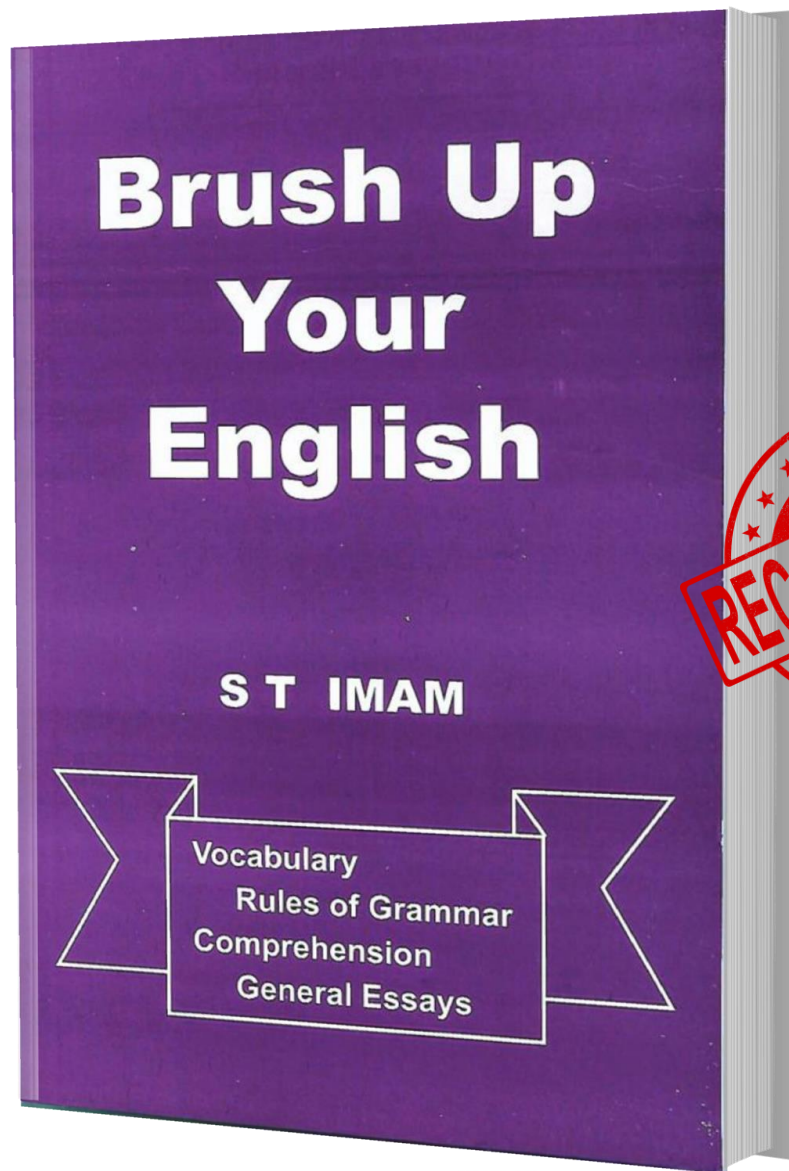


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Doha deal

WITH the signing of the peace deal between the US and the Afghan Taliban in Doha yesterday, America's long war in Afghanistan may be coming to a close.

America's envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban's representative Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar were all smiles while signing the deal in the Qatari capital. But the days ahead will show whether these cordialities are genuine, or if the once-bitter foes return to face each other on the battlefield.

There are quite a few unanswered questions emerging from the Doha process, as well as some lessons that should be learnt by all sides.

If everything goes according to plan, Afghanistan's long nightmare may indeed soon give way to a more peaceful future.

However, knowing that country's history, it is too early to celebrate, though one should remain optimistic considering that the alternative to dialogue is relentless war.

And over the past four decades, Afghanistan has been battered by more than its fair share of conflict, as a result of foreign meddling as well as its own political elite's lust for power.

The Americans and their Nato allies have agreed to withdraw all foreign troops within 14 months, while the Taliban have consented to talk to the US-backed government in Kabul — a dispensation they have in the past dismissed and derided.

Moreover, the Taliban have also agreed to not host Al Qaeda, a former ally, or any other terrorist outfit in any of the areas the militia controls. This can only be welcomed.

On paper these are all positive developments, though it will be up to the stakeholders — primarily all Afghan factions, the Americans, as well as neighbouring states — to help this difficult but doable peace process succeed.

One of the main lessons that should be learnt from the Afghan imbroglio is the failure of nation-building projects by foreign forces.

While the US invaded Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 — as the Taliban were hosting Al Qaeda at the time — this mission quickly turned into a more complicated ‘civilising’ project, as the Americans sought to remake the country in their own image, without realising the tribal and ethnic complexities of Afghanistan.

Similar tales of disaster have emerged in Iraq, Libya and Syria, where the US and other Western forces have toyed with regime change, with horrific results.

Secondly, the government in Kabul must accept the Taliban as a political reality, even though both sides despise each other at the moment.

The fact is that unless Afghans trust each other and work together, no foreign-backed peace initiative will succeed, as the Mujahideen infighting after the Soviet withdrawal showed. And the Taliban must also pledge to respect the political process and work within democratic norms if they wish to see peace prevail in their homeland.

Train tragedy

FRIDAY’S tragic accident in which at least 20 people lost their lives after a train rammed into a passenger bus at an unmanned crossing near the Rohri railway station in Sindh could have easily been avoided. The death toll is likely to rise with many wounded bus passengers in precarious condition.

This is not the first time that an unmanned crossing has been the scene of a deadly collision between a train and a bus. Given that there are as many as 3,000 unmanned crossings in the country, we cannot rule out similar occurrences in the future. In fact, collisions at unmanned crossings are perhaps the main cause of deadly train accidents here. The sad part is that, instead of taking steps to prevent such accidents, the tragedy is now being used to score political points.

For instance, it would have been much better for Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid to have directly approached the Sindh government to address the issue of unprotected crossings rather than starting a blame game during his news conference on Saturday. He must not forget that the buck will always stop at his door as railway minister and his performance will come under public scrutiny whenever there is a railways disaster on his watch.

Even if the minister is not 'directly' to blame for the latest incident, the people are well within their rights to ask him what his ministry has done to prevent train accidents that occur frequently because of its negligence. Pakistan has a long history of train accidents mainly because of poor infrastructure and the absence of safety standards.

The vast majority of accidents take place because the railways has not invested in infrastructure. In 2019 alone, there were over 100 train accidents, including a fire that engulfed three coaches of the Tezgam in October. More than 70 people died.

The number of train accidents also includes derailments, something a senior railway official recently described as 'normal'. It is unfair to blame the incumbent government for the mess the railways is in. Yet this government was expected to pay more attention to stop further decay of the railways and improve its overall performance. The prime minister had announced in July that additional funds would be allocated for the proper maintenance of the railways infrastructure, and that officials responsible for neglecting the safety of the passengers would be held to account. Action on that promise is still awaited.

Vaccine-derived polio

THE frequent emergence of vaccine-derived polio virus type-2, or VDPV2, cases in the country has led to complex challenges for the health authorities. Most of these cases have surfaced in KP where, in addition to an overall surge in polio cases this year, there has been violence against polio teams. Since the second half of 2019, a total of 31 VDPV2 cases have surfaced — 22 in 2019 and nine in 2020 so far. This is a matter of great concern because the type 2 virus was believed to have been eradicated globally and WHO had discontinued the vaccine for it in Pakistan some years ago. The oral vaccine that is now administered to children in the country only contains antigens for the P1 and P3 strains. According to WHO, comatose virus contained in oral polio vaccines that keeps circulating in under-immunised communities for at least a year causes vaccine-derived polio. In this instance, the VDPV2 cases are believed to have been caused by a mutation in the type 2 virus. It is unclear how the virus resurfaced. But the authorities should take note that it has become a threat to global anti-polio efforts.

Meanwhile, vaccine-derived polio cases have also surfaced in several countries of West Africa, such as Congo and Nigeria (which was set to be declared polio-free last year); as well as in the Philippines, Malaysia and China. Some experts have suggested that malnutrition and poor sanitation are a major contributing factor in the resurfacing of VDPV2 cases. As the health authorities prepare to take up the growing polio challenge, they must also identify the gaps in the anti-polio programme and analyse how they can boost eradication efforts, which only some years ago had brought down the number of cases in the country substantially. Prioritising polio awareness among communities and neighbourhoods and providing more security for vaccinators to get the campaign back on track would be a good beginning.

Marching for women's rights

THE citadel of patriarchy is once again in turmoil.

Women demanding their rights are, by definition, a threat to male privilege in such a milieu. When they do so en masse, as planned on March 8 — International Women's Day — it seemingly becomes an existential threat.

The reverberations from last year's Aurat March have reinvigorated the self-appointed guardians of culture and morality into dusting off the usual 'obscenity' and 'vulgarity' tropes.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman has openly threatened participants in the upcoming event, exhorting his supporters to stop the march regardless of any "sacrifice" that might entail.

A few days ago, a petition was filed in the Lahore High Court asking for a permanent ban on the Aurat March for being an "anti-state" and "anti-Islamic" activity.

During its hearing on Thursday, the LHC chief justice rightly observed that "freedom of expression cannot be banned".

The women's rights movement in Pakistan has come a long way from the days of Gen Ziaul Haq's misogynistic dictatorship, a time when rape victims who braved the courts but could not produce four male witnesses were often jailed for adultery.

Many incremental changes have come about since then in terms of legislation, awareness and victims' support groups.

They are, in part, a product of wider exposure to contemporary social movements and of increasing female participation in the public sphere (ergo, their economic empowerment).

These factors threaten traditional notions of family and the society as a whole, where power emanates from men.

However, as every case of 'honour' killing, forced marriage, domestic violence, etc illustrates, the struggle for women's rights in this country remains at its core about their fundamental, inalienable right to agency and autonomy.

The chauvinistic resistance to the upcoming march demonstrates that it is to be fought, not only in parliament and the courts of law, but in the minds of men, and the women who have internalised the patriarchal narrative.

For all these reasons, and to endorse the Aurat March as a legitimate platform for women to raise a collective voice for their rights, elected representatives from mainstream parties must themselves join the rally on March 8.

The event has become a lightning rod for regressive elements to obfuscate the very real issues that the event highlights and the legitimate demands it makes of government and society. Here the media can play a responsible role in keeping the focus on the larger picture, rather than sensationalising the minutiae.

Meanwhile, local administrations must provide all possible security to the participants.

No one should be allowed to create a hostile atmosphere, and incitement to violence such as that by the JUI-F leader must not go unnoticed lest it embolden others.

It is the democratic right of women to challenge gendered expectations in both the public and private spheres, and articulate them however they may choose to do so.

Government absence

SINCE taking up the position of adviser on finance to the prime minister, Hafeez Shaikh has not attended any of the meetings of either the Senate or the parliamentary standing committees on finance. This prolonged absence is seen by many parliamentarians as a sign of defiance. So serious is the concern among some elected officials, that the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance has decided to defer debate on five key bills introduced by the government until the finance adviser makes a personal appearance to answer lawmakers' questions. Separately, the Senate has asked him to share details of the agreement reached with the IMF after the second review. Some of those bills are essential for the IMF programme, and indefinitely shelving them could complicate programme implementation. The committee members have decided they will not consider voting on the bills until they have been given a briefing. The MNAs from the ruling party have also agreed. Regarding the demand for a briefing before the Senate, it is not yet known how Mr Shaikh will respond.

It is not hard to see the legislators' point of view. If the government is asking parliament to pass a law, the least that is expected is a briefing to parliament about the law and the need for it. Beyond this, it is also essential to consider the reservations that might be expressed as the process advances. This is the basic building block of our democracy. Not coming to the house to answer questions gives the impression that the government wants to treat parliament like a rubber stamp. It is unreasonable to expect parliament to vote on any bill or legislation without interaction with government ministers. At least one of the bills in question, for example, significantly expands the surveillance powers of the State Bank, which could be a requirement under the FATF action plan as well as the IMF programme. But it also has implications for citizen privacy and other areas that might be constitutionally protected. Likewise, if there are commitments in the IMF programme regarding policy matters in which the people have a stake, such as power tariffs or taxes, then parliament has a right to expect a clear briefing. Keeping parliament at arm's length, especially in legislative matters, is no way for a democratic government to behave.

Literature festivals

ON Sunday evening, the Karachi Literature Festival wrapped up its assortment of panel discussions at the Beach Luxury Hotel, which seems to have become its permanent abode. The festival was the last in a series of literary events that peppered the winter 2020 calendar. It had been preceded by the Sindh Literature Festival, the Lahore Literary Festival, the Adab Festival and the Children's Literature Festival. While KLF, that was launched over a decade ago, was the first event of its kind to be held in the country, other cities have followed in its footsteps — and sometimes have even outshone it when it has come to encouraging stimulating discussion or bringing in a star-studded guest list from home and abroad. Today, Islamabad, Quetta and Lahore can boast of having their own literary festivals that are open to all members of the public. In addition, there have also been several book fairs that have cropped up over the years, including a four-day book fair in Gwadar.

In stratified societies such as ours, these festivals are some of the few spaces that are open and accessible to all citizens and where discussions take place in various languages spoken in the country. Pakistani readers can rub shoulders with the giants of the literary world, asking questions or getting books autographed by their most beloved writers. They also get a chance to come face to face with those in the corridors of power, as many policymakers participate in the panel discussions, or even get entire panels dedicated to themselves. Consequently, one criticism that has been directed at such festivals is that they are increasingly becoming just another space for politics, rather than promoting a love for literature, language and the humanities. Despite the sometimes harsh criticism — which has ranged from being accused of acting as gatekeepers of the written word, to not including diverse or inclusive enough panel guests — an honest appraisal should be welcomed as an incentive to improve and innovate.

Taliban and US folly

THERE are a variety of opinions regarding the chances of success that the peace deal recently signed between the US and the Afghan Taliban in Doha has.

Pessimists see the deal as a ruse by the hard-line militia to get the Americans out of Afghanistan in order to consolidate their grip on the country by overpowering the fragile dispensation in Kabul.

More optimistic voices, however, view this as a historic opportunity to end decades of bloodshed in this battered country.

What is clear is that such a complicated and long-running conflict is unlikely to wind down in days or weeks, and success will be incremental, even if all parties play by the rules.

The peace deal also highlights the fact that over the years, successive US administrations have completely misread the Taliban and were unable to understand the complexities of Afghan society.

At one time, Washington portrayed the Afghan Taliban as the embodiment of evil; today, America's high officials are treating the militia as legitimate stakeholders in the Afghan political process. Perhaps if this realisation had dawned on the US earlier, the violence could have ended many years ago.

The Taliban emerged from their stronghold in Kandahar in the mid-1990s and essentially filled the power vacuum that a chaotic Mujahideen/warlord dispensation had created.

While, indeed, they employed brutal methods to cement their rule, ideologically, as pointed out in these columns, the Taliban were Islamist nationalists, as opposed to the pan-Islamic militant outfits such as Al Qaeda, or the many groups active in South and Central Asia, which wanted to recreate a caliphate.

One of the reasons the Taliban forged an alliance with Al Qaeda was because they were shunned by the international community, despite ruling Kabul. Osama bin Laden's outfit provided them with much-needed funds, and perhaps if global powers had engaged with the Taliban, history might have taken a different trajectory.

The Taliban themselves have evolved over the years; while at one time they shunned all vestiges of modernism and enforced a mediaeval code, today, the tech-savvy insurgents are on Twitter and their leadership happily poses for the cameras.

The Americans tried and failed miserably to remake Afghanistan in their own image.

Afghanistan is by nature a culturally conservative society and most Afghans adopt the symbols the West holds up of 'extremism' — the burqa, the beard, religious orthodoxy — voluntarily.

Hoping that this society would be transformed into a liberal democracy within a few years was incredibly naive and reminiscent of the colonial 'civilising missions' of yore. Moreover, another destructive byproduct of sidelining the Taliban has been the emergence of even more fanatical groups, such as the local IS chapter.

Time will tell if these lessons are integrated into a more realistic Afghan policy by the US and its allies, or if the follies of the past will be repeated.

Power emergency

IT might sound like alarmist talk when the power sector regulator advises the prime minister to declare a 'power emergency' in the country. But given the discrepancy between the figures concerning the circular debt presented by the power bureaucracy and the regulator, perhaps the call should be taken seriously. The power bureaucracy has long been notorious for its total lack of transparency, especially with regard to its reporting of financial data. When pressured by its political bosses to improve its performance, it routinely resorts to managing the numbers rather than the outcomes on the ground, with the result that it is able to show an improvement in performance without actually having achieved anything. The regulator, Nepra, has now reportedly told Prime Minister Imran Khan directly, and in the presence of high officials from the power bureaucracy, that the circular debt figures being reported by the latter are not correct; it has presented its own figures as a counterpoint. For the period ending Dec 31, to take one example, there is a Rs74bn discrepancy in the amount of the circular debt that was reported by the power division and Nepra. The nature of the power system is such that there is no way to reconcile the two different numbers, other than sending both the parties into a room with a neutral arbiter of some sort, who is able to emerge with the correct amount.

Online rules consultation

PUBLIC transparency and accountability mandate that a government legislate in the best interests of its constituents, following an inclusive and exhaustive consultative process. They also require that a government be responsive to concerns that arise as a result of such a process not being followed during the formulation of policies, rules and laws governing the public. The federal government has failed on both counts with regard to the controversial Citizen Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules, which has rightly been excoriated in both international and local quarters. Technology firms as well as press, legal and rights bodies have all warned of the varied and significant harmful effects that can arise by implementing this set of rules, which only came to light last month after the federal cabinet quietly approved it in January. In response to this backlash, the prime minister called for further review and stakeholder consultations — a move that was welcomed by, among others, this paper. However, what has transpired since is extremely disquieting.

After days of mixed messages from official quarters, it now appears almost certain that the so-called consultative process is little more than eyewash. On Friday, the IT ministry notified a review committee that includes only government officials and no industry or civil society representation. Moreover, no assurance has been given that the rules have been withdrawn, leaving it unclear whether the government intends to consult on formulating online regulations afresh or simply on how to implement these rules. Forty Pakistani rights groups have now signed a statement boycotting these talks unless the government commits to revoking the rules in toto. Indeed, if the purpose of the rules is to ‘protect’ citizens against online harm, the need of the hour is data protection legislation, not draconian regulations that no social media giant is willing to comply with. In order to demonstrate good faith, the government must immediately retract the rules and notify legal and technical experts agreed to by these bodies to the review committee.

Anti-Muslim violence

IN the geopolitical arena, where realpolitik and vested interests tend to trump principles, very few states have the courage to speak up for the wretched of the

earth. And when someone does speak up there are consequences, ranging from angry rebuttals from the side usually guilty of abuses, to excommunication and severance of links. In the case of the recent communal violence in Delhi, very few major Muslim states have condemned the Indian state for standing by as the rabid Sangh Parivar mobs went about targeting the Indian capital's Muslims. This country has condemned the BJP-led government for its silence and complicity in the violence; Iran and Turkey have also raised their voices. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in a tweet condemned the "senseless thuggery" and "organised violence against Indian Muslims". Expectedly, the Indians have reacted with wounded pride, summoning the Iranian envoy in New Delhi and lecturing him about interference in India's "internal affairs". Earlier, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also slammed the "massacres of Muslims by ... Hindus".

While these voices are welcome, the collective voice of Muslims that the OIC is supposed to represent is largely ineffectual. Perhaps this is because some of the major Muslim states — particularly the petrodollar-fuelled sheikhdoms that hold sway over the OIC — prefer silence over taking a stand on matters of principle. Whether it is the recent violence in Delhi, India's brutal campaign in occupied Kashmir, the horrific violence the Rohingya have been subjected to in Myanmar, or the never-ending nightmare of the Palestinians, the collective 'Muslim voice' is conspicuous by its absence. Perhaps one of the main reasons for this, aside from the fear of losing trade and security ties with those that 'matter', is the fact that the Muslim world is itself a house divided.

Nowhere is this internal rift more evident than the battlefields of Yemen and Syria. In Yemen, there is no end in sight to the deadly campaign launched by Saudi Arabia and its allies in the region and the West against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels. Though levels of violence are down, the stalemate continues in what the UN has termed the world's biggest humanitarian disaster currently. In Syria, a troubling new confrontation is brewing between the government in Damascus and Turkey, which backs rebels opposed to Bashar al-Assad's regime. Fighting for control of Idlib — one of the rebels' last major bastions — has amplified the human catastrophe, and deadly skirmishes between Syrian and Turkish troops may well spiral into a wider regional conflagration. Clearly, statesmanship and vision are required from the Muslim world to sort out internal rifts, and speak up for Muslim communities persecuted in non-Muslim states. A recent effort in Kuala Lumpur was scuttled by some Muslim 'brothers' as they felt

their leadership of the ummah was at stake. In such circumstances, how will the Muslim voice be heard?

Petrol prices

IT is often considered disrespectful to bring up remarks made by Prime Minister Imran Khan when he was in the opposition.

But there is no harm in recalling that he did at the time berate the then government for not passing on the full impact of declining oil prices to the people.

His close colleague, Asad Umar, was on air regularly to talk about how damaging it was for the government to use taxes on oil and gas to generate revenue while Mr Khan conveyed his message at rallies repeatedly.

To even suggest in those days that taxing oil was actually a routine practice around the world and that most countries were slow in passing on the benefits of falling oil prices to consumers was treated by the PTI as a suggestion without any merit.

When the party came to power, it found in place a budget that had an automatic mechanism that could be used to make adjustments in taxes on oil prices to compensate for revenue shortfalls in other areas.

In one of its mini budgets earlier on, the PTI government got rid of this mechanism amid claims that it was immoral and wrong and that the new way of doing things would not rely on taxing fuels to generate state revenue because it was inflationary and burdened the masses.

But today, when faced with their first large oil price drop, the government has resorted to previous tactics, perhaps in an even more aggravated form than its predecessors.

Oil prices have plummeted in international markets on the back of a sharp slowdown in economic activity following virus-related shutdowns, particularly in China.

Instead of sharing this price drop with the people, the government has decided to sharply increase the rate of the petroleum levy on petrol and diesel, passing on a

meagre part of the declining price to the people and keeping the rest for itself to buttress its revenues.

This may be in keeping with past practices.

But today, the people are expected to forget that they were promised anything different.

Faced with a mounting revenue shortfall, and tough targets inscribed in the IMF programme, the government has little choice but to resort to leaning on those revenue lines that are most elastic.

It is understandable that the government is employing the same means.

But it is equally understandable why the opposition is roasting the government for it.

An unsolved mystery

AS much as officialdom may wish, the issue of the toxic gas leak in Karachi's Keamari port area last month is not about to quietly dissipate into thin air. A sessions court in the city has summoned two law-enforcement officers over the refusal by the local police to file an FIR against relevant personnel over the death of several people allegedly due to noxious fumes. The tragedy took place in mid-February when hundreds of people began experiencing respiratory distress and other symptoms. Around 400 individuals had to be rushed to hospital; the news sparked panic in the area and the city at large — notwithstanding some stunningly tone-deaf photo-ops by government officials. At least 10 of those affected died over the next couple of days. It was the son of one of the victims who made the unsuccessful attempt to lodge the FIR, and then approached the court seeking redressal.

The entire case typifies the authorities' lackadaisical approach to matters of public importance and their indifference to the people's right to demand answers and expect accountability. More than two weeks after it occurred, there is still no confirmation as to what caused the leak; it remains as much of a mystery as ever. Conjecture and surmise has given way to official silence. The generally accepted version is that the phenomenon was caused by "exposure to soybean dust", spread through the air by improper unloading of a ship carrying containers

of soybean. However, a number of experts have refuted this view. They say that if this was so, then one would imagine the unloading crew must have been the most severely affected; by all accounts, that was not the case. Has any investigation been carried out into possible SOP violations at the port? What were the findings? If the cause has not been determined and no loopholes plugged, how can a repetition of such a horrific event be prevented? But as usual, it seems, what is out of sight is out of mind.

Seeking Nawaz's return

THE government's decision to approach the British authorities to seek the 'extradition' of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who is in London these days for the treatment of a reportedly complicated ailment, cannot be defended on any grounds.

However, the move has not come as a surprise.

Many political observers were expecting the government to take such action, especially over the last few days since the Punjab cabinet turned down a request from the Sharif family to extend the 'medical bail' that had been granted to the ailing PML-N leader.

The provincial government tried to justify its decision, saying that the Sharif family had neither shared the "necessary medical reports and updates" with it, nor admitted the former prime minister to a UK hospital for treatment for his illness.

It has been triumphantly brandishing a picture showing Mr Sharif and his family members in a restaurant, in order to convince the public that the Sharif family had taken advantage of his illness to flee the country.

But none of the doubts being raised by the government about Mr Sharif's health justifies its letter asking for his 'deportation' by the British authorities.

For starters, while Mr Sharif may have been convicted and sentenced to a seven-year jail term, he had not escaped from prison to flee the country.

He left the country only when the courts suspended his sentence and granted him bail, permitting him to proceed abroad for treatment in view of his

deteriorating health on the recommendation of a government-appointed board of senior doctors.

The court had also allowed him to seek from the Punjab government an extension in his bail if his treatment required him to stay abroad for a longer period.

Thus, the government has embarrassed only itself by effectively asking the British authorities to treat the former Pakistan leader as a fugitive from justice and to deport him to Pakistan.

The best strategy for the government would have been to approach the courts to instruct the family to provide whatever updates or reports it needed to extend his stay abroad.

The government, which actually facilitated his release on bail and his departure for treatment abroad as his condition deteriorated in prison here, is now using his extended stay in Britain for politicking purposes to discredit him in the eyes of the voters. Such tactics seldom work.

Having said that, it must be pointed out that there is no logic to the former prime minister's brother Shahbaz Sharif's prolonged stay outside the country. Being the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, he has certain duties to attend to in parliament. If he is unable to return home soon, he should relinquish that job and let someone else lead the opposition in the Assembly. His position is crucial to parliamentary traditions and democratic norms. He must fulfil his responsibilities.

SBP chief in PAC

THE governor of the State Bank of Pakistan made an appearance in front of the Public Accounts Committee on Tuesday to field questions from the members and to reassure them that whatever risks the inflows of short-term foreign investors to the government's local currency debt auctions may pose, they are manageable. He has a bit of a task ahead of him when it comes to convincing the public on this point for a variety of reasons. One is that this phenomenon is relatively new in Pakistan, at least on this scale. Close to \$3bn have flowed into local currency government debt instruments from foreign investors, most of whom are 'carry traders'. The latter is a class of investors that borrows from one country where

interest rates are low and invests in another where the same rates are high, earning a nice and easy margin in between. The biggest risk these 'carry traders' run when investing in a country like Pakistan is the exchange rate, since their investment is in local currency. If the currency is devalued before they decide to pull out, then whatever profit they would have made through the interest rate would be wiped out because of devaluation. State Bank governor Reza Baqir is right to play down the risks that this money may pose to the external stability of the economy. But the market is betting, whether right or wrong, that the inflows have tied his hands regarding the interest rates, and, keeping this mind, all eyes are on the forthcoming monetary policy decision due this month.

This has been a big challenge for Mr Baqir. The market has made up its mind that with inflation on the downswing, which it now seems to be, the conditions for a rate reduction do exist. The State Bank governor also told the PAC that the monthly average inflation is expected to stay between 11pc and 12pc by the close of this fiscal, whereas it stands midway in that range at the moment. If one month's inflation release shows that the spiral has peaked, it may still not be sufficient grounds for a rate cut since the yearly outlook remains the same. At that point the governor is sure to face a fresh round of questioning, and the pressure that would be put on him to start unwinding the high interest rates would definitely become more intense. The question is whether he is ready for that moment.

Discouraging cigarettes

MOST readers know about the hazards of cigarette smoking, which is linked to a host of illnesses, including acute myeloid leukaemia, lung cancer, throat cancer, oral cavity and heart disease. But despite increasing awareness, the sale and production of tobacco products have risen in large parts of the world. According to the World Health Organisation, tobacco kills more than 8m people each year, including 1.2m non-smokers who are unfortunately exposed to second-hand smoke. Even more worryingly, WHO estimates that over 80pc of all smokers reside in low- and middle-income countries, which already suffer from overburdened healthcare systems. In Pakistan, the use of cigarettes, gutka and sheesha are still largely culturally acceptable habits and fairly inexpensive and easy to acquire. To counter this damaging trend, the Ministry of National Health Services has now imposed a ban on the display of cigarettes at sale points,

hoping it will lead to a reduction in the number of smokers in the country. There is reason to believe that such policies work, but only if they are implemented on the ground through sustained efforts by lawmakers and the law-enforcement authorities. Otherwise, policy on paper alone cannot lead to change. For instance, despite a ban on the sale of loose cigarettes, shopkeepers continue the practice, without fear of facing repercussions.

Pakistan is signatory to the Convention on Tobacco Control, which calls on governments to impose taxes on tobacco products, increase awareness on the harms of cigarette smoking, and restrict indoor venues for public smoking. It also calls for “a limitation in the interactions between lawmakers and the tobacco industry” to prevent lobbying by Big Tobacco companies, which happen to be major taxpayers in the country. Last year, however, the prime minister was photographed receiving a cheque from the representative of an international tobacco company to construct dams in the country — in spite of his own record of building free-of-charge cancer facilities. Change must begin at the top.

Power dysfunctions

THREE separate issues are now doggedly evading resolution in the power sector, and if left to fester, they can potentially lead the way to a crisis. The first is the question of an impending tariff hike which the government has now grown wary of passing through, given the enormous pressures that the inflationary spiral of the previous year has placed upon the people. The second is the promise Prime Minister Imran Khan made last year to exporters that they would receive electricity at the rate of Rs7.5 per unit, which is heavily subsidised with the average rate being Rs15 or so in the rest of the system. His government is uncertain about how this is to be delivered considering that neither the power nor finance division is ready to foot the resultant bill, which could be as large as Rs60bn. At the moment, the Economic Coordination Committee is dithering over ways and means to deliver on this pledge, while Mr Khan himself is said to be demanding a decision. The third issue involves a power tariff hike of almost Rs5 per unit on the average tariff for residents of Karachi, whose electricity the government has been subsidising for a number of years now in the interest of maintaining uniform rates across the country. There is visible fatigue with the subsidies involved, but nobody in government can muster up the will to pass this through in one go.

The government is now struggling with itself over how to crack these three issues. On Wednesday, the ECC threw a few spanners into its own policymaking machinery, perhaps in an effort to obfuscate the decision on the tariff subsidy for exporters. First, it made up its mind to debate who exactly was an exporter, and second, it decided to hammer out the financial impact of the subsidy since the power and finance divisions had differing estimates of the rupee cost involved. This angered Mr Khan, who ordered that an immediate decision be made. The case is the same with the power tariff hikes that were supposed to have been passed through late last year but were postponed under political pressure. Mr Khan has ordered a freeze on all gas and power tariff hikes, but his financial adviser has committed to the IMF that the mounting circular debt will be arrested without placing any further burden on public finances. The only way to do this is to improve recoveries or raise tariffs.

We can debate what is at the root of these problems, but what is beyond doubt is that without deeper reforms, the difficulties will simply continue to resurface. Thus far, this government has brought forward no big ideas whatsoever for reform of the power sector. Continued muddling will simply keep bringing us back to these old debates over and over again.

Vicious propaganda

THE vitriol against the Aurat Azadi March is rising to a crescendo. A peaceful rally is being brazenly threatened. Now the Jamia Hafsa, a women's madressah affiliated with Islamabad's Lal Masjid, whose allegiance to extremist ideologies is on the record, has added its voice to the growing climate of intimidation. A statement apparently signed by its students was issued on Wednesday claiming responsibility for defacing a mural in the city designed in connection with the rally. They also urged citizens to forcibly prevent the marchers from proceeding through their localities. Earlier, a senior Lal Masjid cleric said that the defacement was the work of members of the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, carried out with the blessing of the institution's chief cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz. The latter's wife Umme Hasaan, in a video circulating on social media, announced that the Jamia Hafsa women would launch a "counter protest" at the same venue on the same day. The JUI-F has openly exhorted its supporters to take the law into their own hands to stop the march. Two applications have been filed with the ICT administration against the rally going ahead on the grounds it could lead to a

clash between the participants and opponents of the march. The Jamaat-i-Islami has also announced its own Aurat March at the same venue on March 8.

The democratic right to protest is contingent upon doing so in a peaceful manner. In this case, regressive elements, using specious faith-based arguments to obfuscate the demand for women's rights, are laying the groundwork for an ugly and possibly dangerous confrontation. Law-enforcement agencies have a critical role to play if the self-professed 'morality brigade' is not to create mayhem on March 8 — and then perversely claim it was 'provoked'. The open threats, such as those levelled by Jamia Hafsa and JUI-F, are complemented and reinforced by the venom being spewed on mainstream and social media against women speaking about what the feminist movement stands for. In one egregious instance, a playwright who may have the dubious honour of setting the benchmark for misogyny in a deeply misogynistic society, rained down a barrage of filthy abuse on women's rights activist Marvi Sirmed. Some talk show hosts have with conviction and clarity expressed a nuanced understanding of why the march is so important. Given the weight their opinions carry, many more such personalities must also nail their colours to the mast.

Accessibility audit

FOR many structural and societal reasons, navigating public spaces in Pakistan is difficult and stressful — sometimes virtually impossible — for anyone who isn't an able-bodied adult man. For people with disabilities in particular, environmental and policy barriers create an entire infrastructure of exclusion which obstructs their active participation in society. On Wednesday, while deliberating on implementation of the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020, the Senate Committee on Human Rights heard from a number of PWDs on just some of the ways in which their daily lived experiences are fraught with discrimination and even danger. This need not be so, but it requires a fundamental shift in how policies are made, ensuring that public development and services are truly inclusive. To this end, the committee discussed issues of access in two key service sectors: banking and aviation.

Here too, despite the State Bank working for years to ensure bank branches are wheelchair accessible and their ATMs usable for people with sensory disabilities, it is clear that the work lags far behind. In aviation, PIA has resorted to offering

passengers with disabilities discounts without considering the many other barriers to access — a classic case of ad hoc, charitable approaches failing to address what is essentially a systemic issue in need of systemic reforms. While it is encouraging that the committee directed the stakeholders present to work to improve these conditions, this does not solve the fundamental problem that PWDs face: how to access a disability-friendly bank, or any other service, if the public infrastructure they must move through to access it is itself inaccessible? The ICT law may have been passed only this January, but the Accessibility Code regulating public infrastructure standards across Pakistan has been in place since 2006. As a start, federal and provincial authorities can begin the long process of making public infrastructure accessible for PWDs — and thereby safer for the general public, including women and children, the elderly and chronically ill — by ensuring that all PC-1s are compliant with this code.

Whose culture

ON Dec 4, 2019, a federal minister sent a rather peculiar letter to the Sindh chief secretary, alerting him to a wave of “sub-nationalism” in universities, “glorifying sub race cultures and highlighting nationalist movements”.

He requested the provincial authorities to dissuade students from participating in “political/ethnic/sectarian activities” by making university administrations issue warnings to them.

In response, in a recent press release, PPP Senator Raza Rabbani denounced the letter, which he believed was “suppressing Pakistan’s nationalities, regional cultures and students” and was in violation of academic freedom, provincial autonomy and the Constitution.

He included a passing reference to the language riots in Bengal, and the dangers of erasing Pakistan’s diverse ethnic identities and languages in favour of “One Unit” type policies.

Senator Rabbani is correct.

Pakistan is special because of the diversity of its people, and any attempt to impose an artificial homogeneity is not only bound to fail but can prove to be dangerous, alienating smaller nationalities by adding to their grievances and sense of persecution.

Furthermore, to view students through the lens of suspicion — as if they are criminals in the making rather than the leaders of the future — exposes a deep-seated paranoia state authorities harbour towards their own people.

These are not signs of a healthy society, and what is perhaps most tragic is that nothing about this attitude is new, but a continuation of past lessons not learnt.

Earlier, Punjab University students affiliated with religious parties have 'intervened' in the cultural events of Baloch and Pakhtun students, including uprooting and setting their camps on fire.

Isn't it sad that the days reserved for celebrating Pakistan's vibrant cultures and languages can descend so quickly into violence — and that too at a university, which is supposed to be a hub of learning and exchange of ideas? Public universities, in particular, allow students from different parts of the country to interact with different cultures — often for the first time.

In the absence of such activities, we are simply promoting a political culture of intolerance and blind submission.

Saving the deal

OVER the past week or so, events in Afghanistan have appeared quite surreal. Last Saturday, the Americans and the Afghan Taliban signed what appeared to be a historic deal in Doha that was designed to bring to an end the nearly two-decade-long American presence in Afghanistan. There were smiles all around as the once bitter foes shook hands warmly, though naysayers were quick to point out that this was a doomed accord. Sure enough, soon after the signing of the deal, the Afghan government refused to release around 5,000 Taliban prisoners. Thereafter Donald Trump and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who signed the Doha deal on the Taliban's behalf, had an over half-hour telephone conversation, with the American president commenting that "the relationship is very good that I have with the mullah". However, the relationship was tested as the US bombed Taliban targets soon after the call, apparently because the militants had attacked Afghan troops. And on Friday, violence revisited Kabul as gunmen attacked a condolence reference for a senior Afghan Hazara leader. Afghan politician Abdullah Abdullah was present at the ceremony but escaped unharmed. It is

unclear if the Taliban are responsible, as the attack appears to have sectarian overtones.

While it has indeed been a tumultuous week, considering this is the Afghan theatre much worse could have occurred. Moreover, Afghanistan has been witnessing instability for the past four decades, so any peace deal must be incredibly flexible and accommodative, considering the spoilers that are at work, and the huge gulf of mistrust that marks relationships between all stakeholders, foreign and Afghan. Right now, the focus must be on de-escalation and the prevention of further violence. Once that is achieved the sooner the Afghan government and the Taliban meet, the better. As we have written in these columns previously, no foreign power can dictate peace in Afghanistan; that country's own forces must forge a modus vivendi for peace to prevail.

However, it is true that the Americans can do more to make the peace deal work, and prevent it from falling apart completely. The US can certainly work on the Afghan government and convince it to be more flexible towards the Taliban. If the Afghan government refuses to budge, the Taliban are likely to return to the battlefield and the carnage that has characterised life in Afghanistan for the past several decades will only continue, much to the detriment of the people of this battered land. By all means the Taliban must stop carrying out acts of violence, especially those that target non-combatants. But true peace can only be achieved when the Afghans themselves desire it, and all political, tribal and ethnic interests in the country are willing to talk to each other and create a new way forward that shuns violence. All stakeholders — Afghan and foreign — need to put in extra effort to make the deal work.

Building collapse

A NUMBER of people lost their lives on Thursday when a five-storey residential building collapsed in Karachi, causing two other adjoining housing structures to cave in. The responsibility for the deaths of at least 17 men, women and children lies with those who undertook the illegal construction of a sixth storey on the small plot as well as the officials who turned a blind eye to the activity. Such incidents have, unfortunately, become far too frequent in the metropolis and other big cities of the country. Last year in December, a similar six-storey

residential complex came crashing down in Karachi's Ranchore Line area, though miraculously no loss of life was reported.

These all too frequent tragedies reflect poorly on the Sindh Building Control Authority and lay bare its contribution to the housing challenges in a city of 20m. What makes the situation even more alarming is that the apartment building that collapsed on Thursday was neither old, nor built on unregulated premises. The five-storeyed Fatima building was built around three years ago in the planned Rizvia Society. The illegal construction of an additional storey on top apparently led to the weakening of the entire structure. Had the building authorities been vigilant and stopped the construction, these deaths could have been avoided. Moreover, if the authorities allow such a careless approach to building in areas that are planned residential neighbourhoods, how would they prevent the construction of death traps in the city's unregulated localities that house millions of people from the poorer segments of society? The mammoth problem of unregulated structures and the SBCA's controversial role has not gone unnoticed. In fact, recently, the Supreme Court, too, commented on the issue during a hearing, and severely criticised the SBCA for allowing the construction of multistorey buildings on small plots. The court ordered the Sindh chief minister to overhaul the body and instructed that top SBCA officials including the director general be removed. Though the SBCA is largely to blame for this incident, a good part of the blame rests with successive governments that failed to come up with a comprehensive development plan for the largest city of the country. The Sindh government has taken the right step by registering a case on behalf of the hapless families who lost their loved ones, but now it must scale up its efforts for conducting a fair inquiry into the incident as well as identifying similarly dangerous buildings across the city.

A common enemy

THE carnage unleashed by the militant Islamic State group in Kabul on Friday is a chilling reminder that this implacable enemy has much to gain from continuing chaos in Afghanistan. Around 30 people were killed and at least 61 wounded when a gathering of Shia Hazaras in the capital was targeted by gunmen belonging to the terrorist outfit. A transnational Islamist group such as IS poses a threat to the entire region; it constantly seeks cross-border allies amongst like-minded violent extremists in its quest for global dominance. The situation thus

calls for more than the government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban to find a way to work together following the withdrawal of foreign forces from their country. It requires that Afghanistan and Pakistan — and potentially Iran, given the many sectarian attacks carried out by IS — coordinate intelligence-gathering and tactical planning, and perhaps to some extent consider operational coordination, if they are to vanquish the terrorist group.

Moreover, strategic objectives have changed in the current political scenario, requiring a recalibration of (tacit) alliances. The Taliban, locked in battle with Nato and Afghan security forces — and reluctant to open up another front — turned a blind eye to TTP militants fleeing military operations in Pakistan's tribal areas and seeking shelter inside Afghanistan. Similarly, the Afghan government, not to mention the US, did the same to gain leverage against Pakistan. When IS expanded its franchise to Afghanistan, it easily found recruits from within the increasingly radicalised local population, and became a direct threat to the Taliban's largely ethnonationalist movement by appealing to the same demographic. The Taliban even lost to the IS some of its more hardline fighters who were violently opposed to talks with the US and influenced by the terrorist outfit's pan-Islamist ambitions. Pakistani militants, however — mostly former TTP elements — comprise the largest component, with Central Asians making up the rest.

In recent months, IS has suffered major setbacks in Afghanistan — especially in Nangarhar province — at the hands of the Taliban and separately, the Afghan security forces. But this may be a narrow window of opportunity. As a UN report notes, there still remain around 2,500 IS fighters in Afghanistan, most of whom are concentrated in Kunar province which is contiguous with Pakistan's western border. If instability continues to reign in Afghanistan, perhaps even escalate as the Taliban try to use violence to gain the upper hand vis-à-vis the Afghan government, IS could regain lost ground. The TTP, with its extreme, transnational ideology is its natural ally. In the event of such a nexus, Afghanistan would be plunged into further violence, and it would only be a matter of time before the bloodshed spills over into Pakistan. For both these countries, therefore, IS is a common enemy. The sooner they join forces to fight it, the better it will be.

GSP-Plus extension

THE European Union has extended its unilateral trade concessions on its imports from Pakistan under the Generalised System of Preferences-Plus system for another two years. The EU uses the GSP-Plus scheme as an incentive to encourage good governance and sustainable growth in developing countries the bloc trades with. The scheme has in the past successfully contributed to the efforts of some of the EU's trading partners such as Paraguay that moved up the development ladder and graduated from being a low- to middle-income country. Thus, the extension in the GSP-Plus status — which is also recognition of the progress made by Pakistan in the last two years on further strengthening laws and institutions to implement the 27 core international conventions on human and labour rights, environment, narcotics control and corruption — is important for the country.

Simultaneously, the biennial assessment report, on the basis of which the facility has been extended until 2022, points out the shrinking space for civil society and the growing curbs on freedom of expression in the country. “In Pakistan, a number of international NGOs are being expelled, with implications for the freedoms of those organisations still in the country. Freedom of expression including through the media is under threat,” it reads. In the area of labour rights, Pakistan has been clubbed together with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar where concerns over freedom of association remain. In the next two years, the country needs to ease EU concerns over these issues or risk losing duty-free access which is crucial for Pakistani products to maintain an edge in the 27-member country bloc vis-à-vis similar products originating from its trade rivals including India, Turkey, Vietnam and China. The importance of GSP-Plus for Pakistan's exports can be gauged from the fact that the nation's shipments to the EU have increased by a hefty 65pc from 4.5bn euros in 2013 — before GSP-Plus tariff concessions — to 7.5bn euros in 2019. In 2018, Pakistan availed tariff concessions on exports worth 5.9bn euros out of the total export earnings of 6.7bn euros to EU states. At a time when the country's exports had been declining or stagnating, it was increasing its market share in Europe thanks to the GSP-Plus scheme. Pakistan is currently at a fiscal crossroads, struggling to break out of its worst economic slowdown ever. The only way out of its financial troubles is through a rapid boost in exports. The EU trade concession can go a long way in helping it achieve sustainable economic growth.

Security for Aurat March

The brave and resolute women of this country are marching today to demand the justice, equality and respect they deserve.

To mark International Women's Day, participants of the Aurat March are demonstrating in several cities, calling for an end to violence, abuse and discrimination against women.

In the past two years, this movement has attracted thousands of protesters and has remained peaceful and well-organised. Armed with placards, posters and an unflinching determination, women are taking to the streets in a public show of power, despite the hatred and vitriol spewed on them by their detractors.

It is clear that for some critics, the notion that women can take ownership of their bodies and their lives is a triggering factor.

In previous years, the post-Aurat March days saw photo-shopped images of marchers carrying provocative posters which were not written by them go viral — images that are still used to discredit the movement.

The swelling backlash and abuse directed at women advocating Aurat March this year is unprecedented.

On social and mainstream media, the atmosphere created by those who feel threatened and insecure about women marching for their rights is a cause for concern.

Death and rape threats have been hurled at activists posting about the march online. In Islamabad, a mural painted on a wall to show solidarity with the women's movement was brazenly blackened and defaced by vandals, reportedly in the presence of the capital's police.

Read: Jamia Hafsa students claim responsibility for defacing feminist mural in Islamabad

A Lal Masjid spokesperson said the vandalism had Maulana Abdul Aziz's blessings, while Jamia Hafsa students have vowed to launch a 'counter protest'.

The JUI-F's Maulana Fazlur Rehman, too, has gone as far as to threaten that the march would be stopped at all cost.

In light of this highly charged and toxic environment, it is incumbent upon the federal and provincial governments to ensure that the Aurat March participants are provided security and that those threatening intimidation and violence are stopped. The authorities will be held responsible if any violent confrontation occurs at peaceful demonstrations where citizens are exercising their democratic rights.

LNG supply chain

AS the power sector's demand for LNG has dropped, the supply chain running from the terminal to the gas distribution companies is facing a near-crisis situation. The plan under which LNG imports were activated and two new terminals made operational relied largely on demand from power generation to keep the supplies of imported gas flowing. But these days, power generation has reduced and many plants are running below their capacity, meaning demand for gas from the power sector has dropped, which has sent a cascading series of consequences up the LNG supply chain. The gas distribution company — SNGPL — responsible for supplies to the power sector in the north, where the two large LNG plants are located, now finds itself holding surplus supplies of gas with no customers to offload it onto, since imported gas is far more expensive than that obtained from domestic fields. With surplus supplies in its system, SNGPL has reduced offtake from its supplier PSO, which has led the latter to slow down the rate at which the vessels berthed at the port discharge their cargo of LNG. And with the decelerating offtake come costs such as demurrage charges, as well as risks, such as suppliers potentially activating their 'take or pay' clauses.

The latter is probably not likely to happen anytime soon. LNG suppliers in the global market are lucky if they can find a good buyer these days and are not likely to try strong-arm tactics on a customer like Pakistan. But demurrage charges and others incurred at the port are real, and present a clear case of concern. What is of greater worry, however, are the mounting bills that come with this. Close to Rs100bn are now owed to LNG suppliers, and Rs450bn are receivable, as per reported figures, by the two gas distribution companies; the latter amount includes but is not limited to LNG-related payments. Clearly, the gas sector is drifting in the same direction as the power sector, with a growing

mismatch between supply and demand, pricing issues and cascading debts running the length of the supply chain.

Two separate actions are necessary immediately to arrest this trend. First is a more robust leadership for the gas sector, which understands clearly how the sector is put together and how an action taken at one end of the chain can send cascading consequences to the other. It would be a mistake to try and tackle the problems that riddle the sector one at a time with no awareness of how they are interlinked. Reducing offtake of LNG from the power sector is one example of such an amateur mistake. The other necessary action is reform, particularly of the sort that allows a greater role to market forces in pricing and sales. Without these two elements, the gas sector could make its way to a crisis situation.

Women in sports

CRICKET seems to have taken the lead in women's sports in the region thanks to the overall mass appeal of the game. It is refreshing to see the Pakistan women's cricket team featuring in mega events such as the World Cup, the Asia Cup and the Commonwealth. More importantly, our women cricketers have managed to earn the unequivocal support of the Pakistan Cricket Board, even though this took a long time coming. The PCB has awarded improved central contracts to women cricketers to narrow the monetary and other gaps that exist between them and their male counterparts. The media too now focuses on them with a regularity that was missing in previous days when sportswomen in the country found it difficult to earn recognition and obtain sponsorship. In a bid to take women's cricket to every corner of the country, the PCB has expanded the network of girl's academies across the country while organising domestic tournaments regularly to assess the talent pool in the country.

Having said that, women in other sports, despite their many international and local achievements, have yet to be granted a status similar to the one that women cricketers have now begun to enjoy. It is unfair that talented women athletes such as swimmer Kiran Khan, tennis sensation Ushna Sohail, martial artist Kulsoom Hazara, badminton duo Palwasha Bashir and Mahoor Shehzad, football captain Hajra Khan, race driver Tushna Patel, weightlifter Rabia Shehzad, etc are not yet household names like cricketers Sana Mir, Bismah Maroof and Nida Dar. Most of these sportswomen have earned laurels in

international competitions and need support from the government as well as the private sector to order to perform even better. Sadly, this support has not been forthcoming. The challenges that women athletes must contend with are extensive and complex. They can range from struggling with identity in a society built on gendered stereotypes to protecting themselves from harassment at the hands of male coaches. Meanwhile, the lack of opportunities available to them to showcase their talent is frustrating. It is up to the government to nurture them by providing them with training opportunities and sports infrastructure. The number of women athletes in Pakistan who have turned in excellent performances at home and abroad over the past decade has been heart-warming. Now they need their endeavours to be acknowledged and the state to promote them as role models in pursuit of gender equality in sports.

Corporal punishment

IN September 2019, a 10th-grade private school student died after being beaten viciously by his teacher in Lahore. In January 2018, a nine-year-old madressah student was bludgeoned to death with a blunt object by his instructor in Karachi. In June 2017, an 11-year-old girl died from an infection in her bones after being struck repeatedly with an iron rod by a government school teacher in Gilgit. These are just a few horrific examples of corporal punishment in education institutes in recent years; the practice is far more widespread and justified as a way of instilling discipline and obedience in children. This is despite the fact that corporal punishment is in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees dignity for all citizens. Additionally, there is little evidence to suggest such cruelty from a young age leads to the desired behavioural changes, while many studies have noted the long-term harm of corporal punishment, including higher rates of aggression and greater chances of victims justifying and resorting to abusing others in the future. Furthermore, children who are physically abused as punishment can internalise feelings of guilt and shame, and develop mental health problems that stay with them as they grow older.

Sindh is the only province to have passed legislation (in 2017) against corporal punishment, even though the law has its own share of loopholes when it comes to penalising offenders. Most recently, the federal human rights ministry has been pushing for a bill to ban corporal punishment to be presented for passage

by the National Assembly — and yet hurdle after hurdle is being placed in its way. Unfortunately, as a society, we are quick to punish, and far too hesitant to use our reasoning skills to resolve conflict. Parents, teachers and caregivers seem to forget that their primary role is to protect and care for children, not to punish them — ‘for their own good,’ as they say.

Coronavirus and the economy

RECENT ADB estimates suggest that Pakistan’s economy could suffer a loss of up to 1.5pc in its GDP growth rate due to the fallout from the spread of the novel coronavirus, while the capital markets have already been roiled by a strong bout of volatility due to mounting fears and anxiety.

World oil markets are seeing a sharp fall — according to some reports the sharpest drop in oil prices since 1991.

This has driven down oil-related stocks that carry heavy weightage in the KSE 100, such as OGDC and PPL, both of which hit their lower circuit breakers on Monday.

In addition, some estimates suggest the global aviation industry could see up to \$113bn worth of revenue losses as a result.

Global supply chains have been disrupted badly because of the massive shutdowns in China that have either closed down industries altogether, or disrupted the return of workers from the new year holidays to the point of creating acute labour shortages in industrial areas that are not directly impacted by the shutdowns.

In every sphere, from travel and aviation to shipping and transport as well as oil prices and capital markets, economies around the world are seeing sharp downswings as a result of the fallout from the efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

There are reasons to be concerned here in Pakistan as well.

At the moment, there are no indications emerging of a widespread outbreak of the virus.

But each day the number of people diagnosed positive is rising, albeit slowly, and there is no way of knowing how far this is going to go.

Besides the obvious public health emergency this poses, the fallout for the economy needs to be taken stock of.

Some people think it is a positive sign that Pakistani exporters are picking up the orders that might ordinarily have gone to China and exports could see a spike in the months ahead.

But it would be terribly shortsighted to find much comfort in this fact.

If the shutdowns persist and spread, it will also seriously impact the scale of demand for Pakistan's traditional exports, such as garments.

Beyond that, the sharp fall in the value of oil-related stocks means the divestment of OGDC shares that was planned in the next few months will have to be postponed, and the privatisation programme will need to be shelved since global buyers are in no mood to extend their stakes while the uncertainty persists.

It is not known how far the phenomenon will go and how many shutdowns we will have to see around the world and for how long.

In this environment, an economy such as Pakistan's, which is struggling to emerge from the crippling effects of a macroeconomic stabilisation programme, will face far more challenges than opportunities.

NAB judgement

IN a landmark judgement, the Islamabad High Court has termed the NAB chairman's arbitrary powers to order arrests as contrary to the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution. This observation was part of the detailed judgement on the bail petition of officers of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. The judgement says "there must be sufficient incriminating material to justify arresting an accused..." and that "mere allegations of misuse of authority would not justify depriving an accused of liberty because an irregularity or wrong decision sans criminal intent, mens rea and illegal gain or benefit does not attract the offences".

This judgement could not have come at a better time. Over the years, it has been established without doubt that the sweeping powers of arrest given to the chairman of NAB by the NAB Ordinance have been used recklessly and often on flimsy grounds to incarcerate citizens. It has often transpired that NAB investigators could not produce any substantive evidence against the accused even after keeping him or her in prison for long periods of time. More often than not, NAB prosecutors could not convince the judges why they needed to keep an accused in prison when the detainee was willing to cooperate with them in the investigation. The abuse of this power of arrest manifested itself at various levels: first, NAB exercised the power even when the charge against the accused did not justify an arrest; second, NAB kept the citizen in jail even when investigators could not come up with evidence that could hold in court; third, NAB insisted on contesting the citizen's bail application despite failing to come up with any logical reason for keeping him in jail. The abuse of this power went against the basic rights of the citizen but there was little relief for the accused. The draconian law and its rampant enforcement, often against those finding themselves on the wrong side of the government of the day, spread panic and fear across society. The IHC judgement should now curtail this abuse of power and lead to greater prudence in pursuing arrests of the accused. It should also embolden citizens and civil society to push back against NAB's encroachment on their fundamental rights. The judgement has reinforced constitutional protections and will hopefully force accountability authorities to exercise their powers within the ambit of the Constitution. This should also spur parliament to bring about necessary amendments to the law to evolve an even-handed accountability mechanism.

Building collapse

SEVERAL days have passed since the tragic Gulbahar building collapse in Karachi; bodies continue to be retrieved from the rubble; and the death toll keeps rising with each passing day. On Saturday, a teenage boy was miraculously found alive during the search-and-rescue operation. Others were not so lucky, with eight bodies, including children and the elderly, pulled out from underneath the debris on Sunday. At the last count, 27 people had been confirmed dead, including seven members of a single family. The building is believed to have collapsed when the owner, who now has an FIR registered against him, began "illegal" and "unauthorised" work: first by constructing an additional floor, and then by building additional pillars to strengthen the foundation after cracks began

to appear in the edifice. Such tragedies are all too common, particularly in the poorly planned, congested cities of the country. In January, a four-storey building collapsed in Sukkur, leading to the death of several people. Prior to that, another building collapsed in Karachi's Ranchhore Lines area. Despite repeated instances, lessons are not learnt, and as one expert put it, these buildings are "ticking time bombs" for the residents living inside them. Moreover, such tragedies are entirely avoidable, and the direct result of greed and incompetence on the part of builders and building control authorities that turn a blind eye to or even abet such careless construction work.

But there has been criticism of the rescue operation as well, with residents taking to the streets to protest over the slow pace and apathy they were made to witness in recent days. One cannot help but wonder how many more lives may have been saved if the rescue efforts were carried out in a swifter manner. According to the protesters, there are still people — possibly alive — underneath the ruins of the fallen building. Whatever excuses are offered this time around, Karachi's residents have every right to be angry.

Call for leadership

THE number of patients in Pakistan diagnosed with Covid-19 has begun to creep up. As per the latest count, there are 19 confirmed cases of the virus, mostly in Sindh.

Federal and provincial authorities are scrambling to take necessary steps to curtail the spread of the virus. However, if the global situation is any indicator, this will be easier said than done.

China has reported some progress in combating Covid-19, but the virus is spreading at an alarming rate in Europe and the US. Iran is also reeling under its devastating effects, while many parts of the world are bracing for tougher days ahead.

In Pakistan, although the authorities were initially slow to acknowledge the seriousness of the threat, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Dr Zafar Mirza and Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah along with their teams at the federal level and in Sindh, respectively, have since shown considerable initiative.

In Balochistan, too, measures have been taken to contain the spread of the disease.

So far, however, the governments of Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan have not displayed the same level of urgency.

More importantly, and alarmingly, Prime Minister Imran Khan has yet to publicly acknowledge the presence of Covid-19 in the country and thereby demonstrate that he is cognisant of the clear and present danger it poses to the nation and its citizens.

Pakistan is in need of a leader who can bring people together to work collectively to forestall a widespread epidemic in the country.

Prime Minister Khan needs to get into action and lead such a national effort.

It is his job to spur all governments to coordinate on inter-provincial activities, fast track funds and procurements, and calm the public's fears while motivating them to adopt precautionary measures.

In order to do this, he must galvanise the political leadership of all parties to work in unison to combat the emerging crisis.

This requires all parties to rise above partisan politics and petty vendettas.

The prime minister must now lead — putting his politics aside and reaching out to his opponents in order to build a truly national coalition to tackle the threat posed by Covid-19.

Success will require a multi-pronged approach that brings together political cooperation, administrative coordination, medical efficiency and decision-making that is clear-headed, swift, decisive and bold.

Rules may need to be re-drafted or relaxed, procedures may need to be shortened, and bureaucratic hurdles will have to be brushed aside if the federal and provincial governments are to move with lightning speed to build up the infrastructure needed to handle the situation.

The opposition should also show willingness to ensure that politicking is set aside until we have prevailed over this health emergency.

There is no time to lose.

The nation expects the prime minister to lead this fight and secure Pakistan from the scourge of Covid-19.

Spectacle in Kabul

WHILE the peace deal signed at the end of last month between the US and the Afghan Taliban provided some hope that the long and brutal war in Afghanistan may be coming to a close, events since then have proved that this may be another false dawn. Violent exchanges have occurred between the Taliban and the US after a brief pause, while Kabul witnessed a major terrorist attack last week when the local affiliate of the militant Islamic State group attacked a condolence ceremony for a Hazara leader. However, perhaps the biggest impetus to peace at this time is the power struggle playing out in the Afghan capital between President Ashraf Ghani and his main political rival Abdullah Abdullah, who served as the country's chief executive in the last dispensation. Over the decades, Kabul has witnessed many strange and surreal events, but the fact that two presidential inaugurations occurred in the city on Monday was truly farcical. Ashraf Ghani was sworn in at the presidential palace while in another section of the complex Mr Abdullah 'inaugurated' himself as the leader of Afghanistan. Moreover, the ceremony was attacked by rockets, reportedly fired by IS.

Sadly, it appears as if history is repeating itself in Afghanistan. Soon after the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992, the country saw a vicious power struggle within the Mujahideen as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar refused to support the dispensation led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. Soon enough, the warlords were going at each other with almost the same zeal as they attacked the Soviets with. This chaotic interlude gave way to the rise of the Taliban, who swept through Kabul in 1996 to establish their 'emirate'. Unfortunately, it appears that the Afghan power brokers have learnt nothing. While foreign forces — the Soviets, the US — played a major part in destabilising Afghanistan, local leaders, from the Mujahideen to the political bosses of today, cannot be absolved of blame. In fact, it is their inherent disunity that is standing in the way of a durable peace. On Tuesday, American troops reportedly started their withdrawal from Afghanistan. If the power struggle in Kabul worsens, the peace deal can safely be consigned to history, as the Taliban are unlikely to negotiate with the Kabul government. In fact, they may

even ask: who do we talk to? It is time for the Afghan political class to show vision and sagacity, or be prepared for more chaos and lawlessness.

Final destination

RECENTLY, the Federal Investigation Agency took a principled stance when, in keeping with the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act, 2018 and the UN's protocol against the smuggling of migrants, it decided not to penalise illegal migrants deported from Greece and Turkey, as was practiced earlier. The decision to not criminalise such people who undertake perilous journeys by land and sea is a positive one, especially in light of growing hostility towards those who risk their lives to escape conflict, discrimination and poverty in their home countries. While the majority of migrants from Pakistan are economic migrants from the small towns and villages of Punjab, they cannot be faulted for seeking the promise of a better life in other lands, something they are promised by agents and racketeers that operate under the radar. They take the route from Quetta to Iran to Turkey and finally reach Greece, where their journey often ends in limbo — or in jail — leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation. Few successfully complete the journey to mainland Europe; there are innumerable obstacles in their path, which can include bullets from border security forces, difficult terrains they must cross on foot, and a ferocious sea to be traversed in rickety boats. In 2018, 11 Pakistanis were included in the list of approximately 90 migrants who drowned when their boat capsized off the coast of Libya. And last year, 31 Pakistani nationals were recovered from inside a truck near the France-Italy border — only a few days after the news of 39 migrants suffocating to death inside an abandoned truck in the UK created headlines around the world.

As noted by the FIA in its most recent statement, migrants are the victims of criminal mafias, not offenders, and they should be dealt with on a purely humanitarian basis, with empathy and understanding. Law enforcement must instead clamp down on all those who deceive them with false promises and try to profit off a very human desire for a chance at a better life.

Wheat, sugar crisis

THE government has sort of 'upgraded' the inquiry committee created early last month to investigate the severe wheat flour and sugar shortages that surfaced across the country in January and fix responsibility. The committee has been converted into a larger commission with an expanded mandate and more powers to probe the shortages that saw the prices of two essential food items shoot through the roof. The federal cabinet has apparently taken the decision in view of the failure of the committee to satisfactorily complete its assignment even after the passage of more than a month of its constitution. The committee was given two weeks to conclude its investigations and submit its findings to the cabinet for action against those responsible for creating the shortages. According to the interior secretary's briefing at the cabinet meeting on Tuesday, the investigators have yet to conduct a "forensic audit" of the information and accounts so far gathered to move forward and draw their conclusions and make recommendations.

It is, however, not clear how the conversion of the committee into a commission will help the government determine the real causes of the crises, leading to a spike in overall inflation that has taken a toll especially on the poor and low-income segments of the population and significantly eroded the political capital of the ruling PTI. Nor is it clear as to what factors prevented the committee from successfully wrapping up its inquiry. The commission has been given one week to finish its job by building upon the work already done by the now defunct committee. Many observers believe that the commission, which consists of senior officials from the anti-corruption agencies and corporate regulators, may not be able to finish its work within the stipulated time frame. The sceptics also feel that the government is looking for the cause of the crises in the wrong places because the roots of the issue actually lie in the country's policies governing these two sectors, and which allow market players to periodically create artificial shortages to rig profits as well as raise their prices.

A number of studies have held the excessive regulatory and financial state interventions in the sugar and wheat markets, in the name of protecting the interests of small-holder farmers and consumers, responsible for the eruption of periodic shortages. These studies have clearly established that government interventions through price-fixing and allocation of massive subsidies across the

supply chains every year have distorted the domestic wheat and sugar markets. Government interference in the market has also made these two commodities internationally uncompetitive and created opportunities for large farmers, millers and others involved in the trade to wrench economic rent at the expense of small producers and poor consumers. It is doubtful that the commission will look into faulty government policies and propose meaningful solutions for addressing the market failures.

Blood begets blood

A RECENT police study on tribal warfare in Sindh highlights the dangers of parallel justice ‘systems’ that continue to haunt law-enforcement authorities in this day and age. According to the Sindh Police report, approximately 104 people have lost their lives in such quarrels, while another 84 have been injured, due to disputes over water, land, ‘honour’ etc. Such acts of revenge and thoughtless killing pepper the daily newspapers, and they are certainly not restricted to Sindh, but plague all four provinces of the country. In other words, tribal blood feuds are a national shame, yet they seem to be so commonplace that they barely raise alarm anymore. Such crimes slowly but effectively weaken and erode the writ of the state, especially if they are not confronted and tried under the formal laws of the land. And they are usually justified over the most trivial of grounds — bruised egos, petty crime, misunderstandings — that can easily be resolved, if there was genuine interest in resolution by those in power. In Thatta, for instance, a young man was killed during clashes between two groups over the cutting down of a tree. But blood begets blood, and many disputes spill over generations.

In its report, the police noted that the majority of tribal killings took place in upper Sindh, where locals have complained of growing lawlessness that has deeply impaired the fabric of society and negatively impacted the region’s socioeconomic progress. Additionally, some researchers have noted tribal leaders using sectarian speech to add fuel to the fire, while growing extremism and the proliferation of weapons in these areas has made matters worse. Murderers then get away with their crime due to the protection and patronage they receive from powerful feudal lords and tribal chieftains. While a ‘tit-for-tat’ mentality is ingrained in many local customs, more often than not, it is those who have nothing to do with the ‘original sin’ that are made to pay the heaviest price. Unfortunately, the practice of customs such as vani continues to hurt the women

and children of this country, despite being a direct violation of the Constitution and the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act. It is nothing short of a tragedy that we still hear about women and girls being ‘sacrificed’ to secure ‘peace’ between two rival groups — bartered like property between men, the collateral damage of tribal warfare.

Hospitals in limbo

IT seems that the federal government’s indecision about taking administrative control of the three largest public-sector hospitals in Karachi has had a debilitating effect on the operations of these health facilities. In a letter written to the chief justice of Pakistan, the employees of the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre have expressed their concern that the uncertain status of the institution was affecting the day-to-day running of the hospital and the future of the workers. The JPMC faculty and staff want the implementation of the Supreme Court’s 2019 verdict in which the administrative control of the JPMC, the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases and the National Institute of Child Health was handed over to the federal government. However, the latter first refused to take on the responsibility for running these institutions, and then in December last year, the government acquiesced in the decision, requesting some time to take stock of the situation. In its latest U-turn, however, the federal cabinet has again refused to assume administrative control of these institutions.

This lack of clarity has impacted promotions as well as the hiring and professional growth of several faculty members and students. Though the daily budgetary requirements — salaries, cost of medicines and other operational expenses — of these hospitals is currently being met by the Sindh government, it is not the statutory authority for hiring competent faculty members and doctors to meet the expanding needs of these institutions. The extent of the prevailing uncertainty can be gauged from the fact that the faculty and doctors are uncertain whether they are employees of the federal or the Sindh government. Moreover, the uncertain status of the JPMC also affects the future of the Jinnah Sindh Medical University that is affiliated with the former. In case of a federal takeover, the JSMU stands to lose its affiliate teaching hospital and thus its status as a full-fledged medical university. The centre must stop dithering and provide a workable solution, advisably in consultation with the Sindh government, to stave off further damage.

Budgeting on anxiety

AS the last quarter of the fiscal year is set to begin, the federal government is starting its conversations around next year's budget.

This is a crucial time and putting things on the right track at this stage will be critical.

The country is in the midst of a strong macroeconomic adjustment in which progress has been made, but victory cannot yet be declared.

In addition, the spectre of a massive slowdown in the global economy and the COVID-19 related shutdowns that might become necessary in Pakistan if an outbreak is to materialise, have cast their own pall of uncertainty over the prospects facing the economy.

The adjustment has exacted an enormous toll on people and business.

Depressed demand and high interest rates have squeezed many businesses to the point of closure, while high inflation has crippled people's purchasing power, pushing millions into poverty.

Just as the demands for an end to the adjustment and a return to growth have reached fever pitch around the country, the uncertainty from the impact of COVID-19 in the coming weeks has emerged as a major source of anxiety to further cloud the outlook.

Little wonder then that the budget debates have kicked off, with the finance ministry listing all the constraints to the resource envelope at the outset.

Among these constraints, it has cited the mandatory transfers to the provinces under the NFC award, debt servicing costs, rising pension expenditure, and high allocations for subsidies and income support programmes.

Pressure is mounting on the government to find a way to roll back provincial transfers, and curtail allocations for subsidies and income support programmes.

Pressure is also growing on the State Bank to reduce interest rates to help curb debt service expenditure that has risen sharply with the latest cycle of monetary tightening.

The politics surrounding each of these movements will push some backs against the wall, doubtless, but the will to continue with the adjustment is now virtually gone.

If the government is forced to think of sweeping shutdowns in order to contain an outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, this situation with its significant trade-offs will be aggravated further.

These shutdowns, wherever they have been implemented, exact a steep economic cost with factory closures and supply chain disruptions, but undertaking them is thus far the only known way of containing the spread of the contagion.

In short, critical decisions are lying in wait for the government and it would be a grave mistake to be caught unprepared.

As budget making picks up pace in the days to come, and we arrive at more clarity regarding an outbreak, decisive and clear leadership will be required.

This is not business as usual.

Those who come to the table with no ideas beyond protecting their traditional priorities will be letting their leadership down.

Spending Rs460bn

WITH a sum as stupendous as Rs460bn — nearly \$3bn — at stake, no wonder there is a tussle over it. The amount, of course, is what the Supreme Court had two years ago determined Bahria Town should pay in land settlement dues for tens of thousands of acres it had fraudulently acquired in Karachi's Malir district. On Tuesday, the federal government suggested before the apex court that a high-powered committee be formed to oversee how the money is utilised. Initially, it had contended that it had the right to any funds deposited in the Supreme Court regardless of the purpose for which they were obtained or deposited. The Sindh government, on the other hand, citing a severe financial crunch and the shortfall in federal revenue due to it, argued its claim to the settlement dues. While the centre has since conceded the right of Sindh to the Rs460bn, it appears determined to have a mechanism put in place to oversee that these funds are spent 'equitably' and 'transparently'. However, according to

the Sindh advocate general, the provincial government is chary of any mechanism that would allow the centre to dictate which development projects could be funded with the money.

Frankly, neither side has any claim to integrity where Bahria Town is concerned. The Supreme Court's damning judgement of May 4, 2018 found Sindh government functionaries wholly complicit in handing over huge tracts of Karachi's real estate to Bahria for its housing project on the city's outskirts. The collusion was well-thought-out and brazen in scope. It involved, among other actions, forgery of documents, manifestly dishonest interpretation of relevant rules, and even legislative jugglery to circumvent a Supreme Court order. As for the PTI government, usually so strident about accountability, it appears to have quietly allowed £190m recovered by the UK's National Crime Agency from Malik Riaz — money "suspected to have derived from bribery and corruption overseas" — to go towards the payment of Rs460bn in settlement dues. In short, this is yet another instance where the long arm of the law seems inexplicably unable to bring Bahria's owner to account. That said, the federal government's proposal that a former apex court judge from Sindh head the above-mentioned committee is a sound one. The settlement dues must be judiciously spent for the benefit of the people of Sindh, and those who have suffered at Bahria's hands. They must not end up enriching corrupt elites.

Zainab Alert Bill

HUMAN rights activists, conscientious lawmakers and all right-minded citizens of this state welcome the passage of the Zainab Alert, Recovery and Response Bill in the National Assembly. The bill will now be sent to the president for his signature in order to finally become law. In this instance, credit must be given to the human rights ministry for relentlessly pushing for legislation that will help expedite procedures and synchronise the various bodies tasked with recovering missing and abducted children. While child abuse or kidnapping is by no means a recent phenomenon, greater media attention on the issue, along with important advocacy work by activists, and the public's reaction to several high-profile crimes against minors have all made the passage of the law possible. In particular, the brutal rape and murder of young Zainab in Kasur, whom the bill is named after, acted as a catalyst for this development.

When the bill was presented before the Senate earlier, after the National Assembly first approved it in January, some raised concerns about the fact that its ambit was restricted to the Islamabad Capital Territory. Keeping this in mind, an amendment was introduced to expand its jurisdiction to the entire country. Under the new law, offenders will be sentenced to at least 10 years behind bars, up to a maximum of life imprisonment. Additionally, the government will set up a helpline and the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Agency, which will issue alerts on missing children and maintain an online database. Due to previous instances of police inaction, lethargy and insensitivity in handling such cases, they will now be required to register an FIR within two hours of receiving a complaint by parents, while special courts will ensure a trial is completed within three months. Despite receiving an overwhelming majority of votes in the Senate, there was some continued opposition from the usual suspects. For now, however, all victories, big and small, count.

Rain tragedy

FOR days now, heavy rainfall, snow and hail have thundered across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, leaving a wave of death and destruction in their path. Over the past week, a number of people, including several children, were killed in rain-related episodes, with roofs and houses caving in on them, while countless others were injured. At the time of writing this editorial, the death count stood over 30, which may rise as further rainfall is predicted. One family in Swat lost three children in a single day when the roof of their house collapsed on them. So far, a few of the worst-hit areas have included Abbottabad, Swabi, Mardan, Dera Ismail Khan, Tank, Orakzai and South Waziristan. In some parts, crops have been damaged too, hurting farmers and the local populations that are dependent on them. Meanwhile, landslides have caused delays and traffic challenges in Upper Dir. While one cannot control nature, we should be able to better prepare for all kinds of natural disasters. After all, this is not the first time rain has wreaked havoc in the province; in fact, it seems to have become an all too common occurrence. Last year's monsoon rain too led to many deaths including of eight children who took refuge in a two-storey house when torrential rainfall disrupted a wedding in Orakzai. The house collapsed, killing 14 people. A few days later, four people were reported to have been 'buried alive' when landslides struck Kaghan Valley — horrific news by all accounts, forgotten all too quickly.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2020 Instead of being proactive, we seem to leave all matters of life and death to fate — a belief that may offer comfort to some, but which also makes it easier for those in positions of power to evade responsibility. If the KP government is not equipped to handle such disasters, the federal government must step in and provide relief to the people of the region in these difficult times.

New province plan

THE announcement of a government plan to create a new province in south Punjab has been overshadowed by widespread worries over the administration's unclear strategy to tackle the coronavirus threat as the number of affected people continues to rise. The scheme, which was finalised at a meeting chaired by the prime minister on Wednesday, seeks to fulfil a key PTI election promise to voters from south Punjab where a new province is a popular demand. The scheme was devised after more than a year of discussions by a committee set up to advise the government on moving forward on the plan. But the blueprint remains sketchy at best. The details revealed so far show the government wants to begin by building a 'separate' administrative infrastructure for the proposed province by appointing an additional inspector general of police and an additional chief secretary in the first phase. These appointments are to be followed by changes in the Constitution to form a new administrative and legislative entity

This isn't the first attempt at carving out a new province consisting of Punjab's southern districts. The demand has existed in south Punjab — one of the country's most impoverished and underdeveloped regions — for a long time. Both the PPP and PML-N tried in recent years to capitalise on the economic deprivation of this region, passing resolutions and bringing hurriedly drafted bills in parliament to showcase their commitment to the cause. But neither party ever organised an intra-party debate to thrash out the issue nor engaged other parties to build a broader political consensus and a workable legislative, administrative and financial framework for the proposed province.

The PTI is no better than its rivals; it has shied away from initiating a wider debate on the matter within the party and avoided reaching out to the opposition parties, particularly the PML-N that wants two new provinces in south Punjab: one comprising the areas under the erstwhile Bahawalpur state and the other

consisting of D.G. Khan and Multan divisions. The entire south Punjab province scheme appears to be part of the political rhetoric of the ruling party which appears clueless on how to proceed, given that it doesn't enjoy the required two-thirds majority in parliament to get the Constitution amended. The division of a province like Punjab into two or three units is not easy. It is not only about tackling the legislative, administrative and financial aspects of the exercise, it is also a hugely sensitive issue that may have serious implications for the structure of the federation and the future relationship of the federating units with one another and the centre. Thus, the move requires the PTI to initiate a meaningful dialogue with the opposition, organise a parliamentary debate on the issue and involve the real stakeholders, ie the people of the region, before implementing the scheme.

Media mogul's arrest

THE arrest of Jang Group owner Mir Shakilur Rehman by NAB has once again highlighted the anti-graft watchdog's high-handedness and propensity to target critics.

In a move that bears all the telltale signs of a witch-hunt, the bureau called Mr Rahman to appear before it and then proceeded to arrest him for allegedly acquiring land through illegal means.

The probe relates to property of almost seven acres that Mr Rahman is said to have acquired 34 years ago during the tenure of the then Punjab chief minister Nawaz Sharif.

According to NAB, since Mr Rahman could not satisfactorily answer its questions, an arrest warrant was served on him and he was detained in the bureau's lockup.

That the bureau decided to investigate a three-decade old matter at this time would be baffling had its modus operandi not been clearly established.

Time and again, NAB has been accused of political victimisation and of pursuing cases against those critical of the incumbent government or the bureau.

It is no secret that NAB has targeted opposition politicians by initiating probes, arresting them and then holding them in custody for extended periods —

remands which have often ended in bail when courts found no reasonable justification to support the prolonged detention of suspects.

The Jang Group's revelation that NAB officials have threatened the closure of its channels and asked its journalists to 'slow down' or stop stories may offer some explanation as to why NAB felt compelled to suddenly take up this case which for all these years did not appear to be on the anti-graft body's radar.

If there is to be an investigation, it must be conducted in a professional, equitable manner and on the basis of sound evidence.

The bureau has earned a reputation for arbitrarily arresting people and exerting pressure on them despite their cooperation with investigators.

In fact, it is this very notion of 'arrest first, investigate later' that the Islamabad High Court criticised when it chastised NAB in the cases of Ahsan Iqbal and Shahid Khaqan Abbasi for failing to produce compelling reasons to arrest individuals.

In a separate case, the court remarked that NAB appeared to be more interested in arresting individuals than investigating them.

Mr Rahman's arrest, as in so many other NAB cases, smacks of deliberate harassment.

This case comes across as a way of silencing a free media that is exercising its right to criticise the flawed accountability exercise.

Containing the virus

THE National Security Council has met to discuss a strategy for a looming healthcare crisis of unprecedented proportions — the contagious coronavirus, which has sparked panic across the world owing to its rapid spread and potential to kill.

The government has announced the formation of a national coordination committee along with a string of measures which include the sealing of borders with Iran and Afghanistan, restricting international flights and barring mass public events.

The advisory also declared the shutdown of educational institutions, cinemas, theatres and marriage halls, the adjournment of civil cases in courts and changes in hearing procedures for criminal cases.

The decisions came as Pakistan reported some 30 confirmed cases of COVID-19, which include at least one individual who did not travel abroad, indicating that community spread within the country could be a reality.

Given that Pakistan is straddled by China and Iran which have among the highest reported cases, the authorities' response to the fast-spreading virus has been lethargic and more reactive than proactive — a circumstance which has led the virus to thrive in other countries.

States including China, Iran and Italy were unable to contain the spread and have reported thousands of cases and hundreds of deaths.

This is a situation our authorities have been aware of for some time.

One illustration of this is that until just a couple of days ago, Punjab, the most populated province, had ostensibly taken no measures to limit public gatherings or establish health protocols.

The ijtima at Raiwind, a congregation of thousands, began despite the provincial government's pleas to organisers not to hold it.

This defies logic. Pakistan is a developing country with poor healthcare infrastructure and low hygiene standards, so authorities ought to have sounded the alarm by enforcing strict screening and cancelling mass public events when the first case was reported at the end of February.

Moving forward, the government must share its resources and work with the provincial governments to contain the virus.

This would include effective screening at entry ports, which until recently involved filling out a form.

Resources must be allocated to establish health desks at ports which check symptoms and isolate passengers who show signs of being infected.

Across cities, the government must kick off mass multilingual awareness drives about hygiene, symptoms and the availability of medical help.

The federal government must take on board religious authorities to examine the roles that mosques can play to create awareness and limit the spread.

Prime Minister Imran Khan should follow in the footsteps of other world leaders and be visible in the COVID-19 messaging campaign, which he had stayed away from until yesterday.

Given the potentially high mortality rate and the ensuing economic losses, this is not the time to bicker over the 18th Amendment or the availability of funds. Our politicians ought to show leadership and focus on action, transparency and communication.

Hot money

THE rapidly accelerating departure of so-called hot money that came pouring into government debt from last July onwards is now going to test the State Bank's commitment to a 'market-determined exchange rate'. In the first 12 days of March, for example, close to \$600m left Pakistani markets, primarily from debt securities, as foreign investors and carry traders rushed for safety with the rising economic impact from the fight against the COVID-19 virus. In the days to come, this exodus is likely to grow, especially since it has induced exchange rate volatility which is the biggest source of uncertainty in the eyes of the carry traders behind these inflows. Just in the last week, the rupee touched 160 to a dollar, and then saw a mysterious dive back to 156.5 on Friday in a move that looked suspiciously like intervention from the central bank. If so, we can be certain that the outflows have already given the central bank cold feet, after its young governor had gone to some lengths to play down the risks of a sudden outflow.

The financial markets will be the first to be tested by the growing clouds of uncertainty that are engulfing the country and the world economy these days. The fact that this is happening in the run-up to a monetary policy decision only complicates the picture for the State Bank. Pressure to reduce interest rates is now higher than it has ever been through this cycle of monetary tightening, and not a single voice is left in the public domain to make the case for continuing with high interest rates. The problem is the State Bank cannot have it both ways. It cannot have a stable exchange rate and low interest rates. Another problem is that the government is in no position to afford the kind of stimulus measures that other economies are announcing to compensate for the slowdowns that the fight

against the virus necessarily brings. An important test is now shaping up for the governor of the State Bank, who has confidently sold the public on the idea of hot money inflows to build reserves, a market-based exchange rate, and tight monetary policy. This is one test for which the textbook had not prepared him, and Tuesday's monetary policy statement will be his answer to the challenge. We will wait to see the outcome.

Guantánamo's prisoners

THE account of Saifullah Paracha, a septuagenarian prisoner of Guantánamo Bay, published recently in this paper is truly harrowing. Mr Paracha, who arrived at the infamous American gulag located in Cuba in 2004, has never been charged with a crime. Moreover, the description of one of his hearings, which was held in the US, and which he was briefly allowed to listen to via an audio link, is akin to "a George Orwell novel", as he puts it. Besides, the detainee says he was tortured and abused by the Americans while incarcerated at Bagram, another American gulag, in Afghanistan. These aren't of course the first revelations of abuse linked to Guantánamo and other detention centres that acquired a notorious reputation in the aftermath of 9/11. Sadly, in these dark spaces away from the public eye, the high principles that the US and other Western states claim to respect appear to be held in abeyance.

While the law must be firm against militants and those involved in terrorism, clearly what goes on in Guantánamo and other similar facilities flies in the face of due process and the rule of law. If states use extrajudicial methods to counter terrorism, then they sacrifice the moral high ground. Soon after Barack Obama entered the White House in 2009, he had promised to close Guantánamo "... no later than one year from the date of this order". Today, in the third month of 2020, this presidential order is dead and buried. Donald Trump appeared ambiguous when questioned about the facility, but has questioned the costs of operating it. The fact is that holding prisoners without charge, and worse physically and mentally torturing them, is a blot on the image of a nation that claims to offer "liberty and justice for all". Those accused of militancy must be tried and punished if found guilty through a transparent legal process. And the sooner 'black sites' such as Guantánamo are shuttered, the better it will be.

PML-N divisions

THERE is trouble brewing within the PML-N. With Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif away in London for some months now, Maryam Nawaz in political hibernation — her recent brief appearance notwithstanding — and Hamza Shahbaz in jail, the family leadership of the party is practically inactive.

Now there are reports of disgruntlement within the rank and file about the lack of direction of the party. The parliamentary party meeting held earlier this week saw heated exchanges between some senior members amid a rising chorus that Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif return home. The general drift has also affected the party's relationship with the PPP and the JUI-F both of whom feel that the PML-N has abdicated its responsibility towards the other opposition parties. If the PML-N leadership has a game plan, very few in the party seem to be aware of it. This is problematic at various levels.

By opting to vote in favour of the extension of the army chief, the PML-N leadership took a huge decision to change the strategic direction of its politics. The decision came as a surprise to almost every party leader and parliamentarian. It was followed as ordered but people remained uncertain why the decision was taken and how it would benefit the party. Many weeks later, the party rank and file still remains unaware of the contours of this new party policy.

The release from jail of Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Ahsan Iqbal, two front-line leaders, promised greater clarity and direction, but, instead, their positions and statements seem to be highlighting the cleavages within the leadership. This confusion coincided with some PML-N MPAs in Punjab meeting the chief minister thereby triggering speculation about the emergence of a forward bloc within the party. It was perhaps an attempt to stem this drift that Maryam Nawaz ended her silence and made a public visit to Islamabad.

If it wants to remain relevant the party would have to put its house in order. The most obvious step towards this end would be for the head of the party to do politics within the country, build a clear narrative and coordinate with other opposition leaders. A leadership calling the shots from foreign shores will only dishearten party members at home, to the point where defections would not be surprising. The PML-N may be going through a phase of self-reckoning but if this phase stretches for too long — which it is — it can easily lead to a loss of

confidence, clarity and cohesion. Keeping the party guessing is never a good policy option whichever way one looks at it. The top-tier leadership may want to make amends before the disgruntlement gets louder, while Mr Shahbaz Sharif might also want to consider the great injustice he is doing to his position as opposition leader in parliament by staying away.

Justice without mercy

“IF a person is mentally ill, how can you hang them?” inquired former chief justice Saqib Nisar, when he was overhearing the case of two mentally unfit death-row prisoners in 2018. Imdad Ali, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia on more than one occasion, had been sentenced to death in 2002 for the murder of a religious teacher. Meanwhile, Kanizan Bibi, who happened to be mute and also diagnosed with schizophrenia, had been behind bars for nearly three decades, charged for assisting the murder of six individuals. According to her family, she was forced to confess to the killings under duress by the police. Two years later, both are still languishing in jail, even though their death sentences have been stayed in the past — multiple times in Imdad Ali’s case. Now, a five-judge Supreme Court bench will hear a review petition filed on behalf of the two prisoners at the end of this month.

It is unfortunate that mental illness is still not taken seriously in Pakistan. And even the most learned members of society are not immune from misinformation. Readers may recall the words of the Supreme Court when it initially dismissed an appeal to delay the hanging of Imdad Ali back in 2016. In an 11-page judgement, the esteemed judges referred to schizophrenia as a “curable disease” which did not classify as a mental disorder. And even if it did, they elaborated, “rules relating to mental sickness are not subjugative to delay the execution of death sentence”. The judgement was criticised by many in the country and made international headlines, until a fresh petition by his lawyers and review filed by the Punjab government led to his execution being suspended — for the third time. Even though Pakistan lifted an informal moratorium on the death penalty in 2015, it is bound by international law to ensure humane treatment of prisoners who suffer from mental disorders. And yet, the lives of so many individuals hangs in the balance, as they continue to suffer inside the confines of overcrowded detention centres, fated to be condemned as prisoners rather than patients in need of urgent medical attention. Inhumane conditions inside prisons can also

exacerbate mental health problems, and some experts say that the number of mentally ill prisoners is on the increase. We must remember the words of one of history's most well-known jurists: "Justice without mercy is cruelty."

New BISP beneficiaries

JUST one cycle of unseasonal weather, the death of a sole breadwinner, or the vagaries of fate in some other form, can drive the poorest of the poor to the edge of survival for an extended period. For those in the lowest income strata, a monthly stipend of Rs5,000 per month under the Benazir Income Support Programme can help keep the home fires burning and provide a cushion against financial shocks. It is therefore heartening to see the PTI government give due importance to this premier social security scheme, especially at a time when double-digit inflation is pushing the poor even deeper into poverty. On Friday, the National Assembly was informed that over 4.4m new names are being added to the list of beneficiaries and that 70,000 had already been included in 15 districts.

The unconditional cash transfers made under BISP since the programme was introduced in 2008 with a monthly stipend of Rs1,000 have had a multifaceted socioeconomic impact. Not only have they increased the purchasing power of millions of households, they have also sustained innumerable small businesses across the country. Moreover, BISP has empowered women who constitute, by design, most of the recipients — as is seemly considering whom the programme is named after. However, some spring-cleaning of this massive countrywide scheme was clearly needed. In December, the government announced that 800,125 names had been removed from the beneficiaries' list after BISP data revealed they were "undeserving" of inclusion. Further forensic analysis brought more shocking revelations to the fore: over 140,000 of such beneficiaries were government servants. It is difficult to comprehend the callousness that can motivate some to misappropriate funds meant to ameliorate the desperate poverty of fellow Pakistanis. Investigations so far have resulted in the recovery of Rs600,000 of the embezzled funds in what one hopes is a sustained process. A programme such as BISP needs to be regularly, and transparently, updated. Without transparency it can easily be tainted by accusations that it is being used to serve political ends.

A common enemy

ON Sunday, Saarc representatives appeared in a video conference to discuss how they could tackle the novel coronavirus threat (COVID-19), as the number of infected patients around the world suddenly climbed over the weekend. In this rare attempt to highlight a common concern, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Zafar Mirza underscored the importance of working together and developing a regional mechanism for sharing health-related information.

A common enemy presents a window of opportunity for all countries at odds to put aside their differences — at least, for the time being — and take on the virus on a war footing. Dr Mirza correctly labelled COVID-19 “the most serious global health emergency in the last 100 years”. To his credit, the health adviser has tried his best to take charge of the situation from day one. Perhaps there would have been greater awareness of Pakistan’s efforts in the fight against the virus had Prime Minister Imran Khan participated in the video conference as his Bangladeshi and India counterparts did.

The global death toll is over 6,500 and set to climb, and millions of people continue to be exposed to the infection. In neighbouring Iran, one of the worst-hit countries, the total number of deaths exceeded 850 — over 120 in the past two days alone.

In Pakistan, the first COVID-19 case was detected about a month ago, when a young man who had returned from pilgrimage in Qom, Iran, tested positive in Karachi. While he fortunately recovered due to timely detection, over 180 others have since been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the country. Out of these, a few are said to be in critical condition.

Undoubtedly, and regrettably, this figure will keep rising in the coming days as tests confirm the worst, as they did in Peshawar, which reported 15 cases yesterday. The vast majority of cases have been found in Sindh, particularly in Karachi and Sukkur, where several travellers from Taftan who had returned from pilgrimage in Iran tested positive. But this may just be because the Sindh government is taking a more proactive, hands-on approach in dealing with the crisis, while understanding the gravity of the situation and the crucial need for honesty.

In yesterday's press conference, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah did not gloss over the facts, laying the numbers before the media, even as reports of more confirmed cases were relayed to him. While the situation is indeed grim, the provincial government's transparency is laudable.

There is also the question of other pilgrims from Taftan who would have returned to their homes in KP, Balochistan and Punjab. Peshawar has just announced a number of such cases. What about Punjab and Balochistan — where is their data? Are screening facilities adequate in these provinces? 'Don't panic' does not mean one should be paralysed either.

A grim milestone

AS the world struggles to come to grips with the global coronavirus pandemic, the grim anniversary of a man-made disaster has just passed. The Syrian war has now entered its 10th year, and there are few signs that hostilities in the Arab country are winding down, with the belligerents ready to make peace. Far from it, there appear to be new and more dangerous fronts opening that could plunge the wider region into a conflagration unless wiser counsel prevails. What started in 2011 as a popular uprising against Bashar al-Assad's iron-fisted rule has in fact morphed into a wider geopolitical battle, with rival ideological blocs using Syria as a chessboard. Moreover, ferocious militant outfits, such as the self-styled Islamic State group and Al Nusra, have used the chaos to establish themselves. In fact, only a few years ago, it appeared as if IS and other jihadi groups were on the ascendant, until they were beaten back by the Syrian government with the help of its foreign allies, as well as a separate US-led coalition.

Today, while Mr Assad's regime has the upper hand against his opponents — thanks primarily to military support from his Russian and Iranian allies, as well as Hezbollah — a new conflict brews as Turkey has entered northern Syria to bolster rebel factions it supports. Only last month, Damascus's troops clashed with Ankara's forces in and around the northern Syrian province of Idlib, with casualties on both sides. Russia has helped broker a ceasefire, but the truce remains tenuous. Up till, now the pro-Iranian Syrian government was fighting local proxies supported by its rivals in the American/Gulf Arab camp, as well as militants. But today, a confrontation between two sovereign states — Syria and Turkey — is very probable. Suffice it to say, such a development will only spell

more misery for the Syrian people. According to one count 384,000 have died since hostilities began, while the UN says half the Syrian population has fled their homes. To prevent this catastrophe from getting any worse, it is essential to defuse the crisis that is brewing between Damascus and Ankara. Once a permanent ceasefire is in place, the numerous multilateral processes — Astana, Sochi — must be reactivated in order to bring Mr Assad and his opponents to the table to hammer out a deal acceptable to the Syrian people. There is grave mistrust on both sides, but the only alternative to reconciliation and peace is further bloodshed.

Hazara province

THE demand for a separate Hazara province along with the one for a south Punjab province has been an active topic of discussion in recent years. In 2010, the proponents of a Hazara province took to the streets to press for the acceptance of their demand after the passage of the 18th Amendment that gave the country's north-western province its new name. So when the PTI government announced plans for the creation of a south Punjab province last week, it was natural for Hazara province advocates to use this opportunity to also renew their call for the division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A multiparty conference organised in Mansehra the other day has asked the government to make a resolution for a Hazara province a part of the one that it plans to move in parliament for the creation a south Punjab province. The move is backed by all the major opposition parties — the PML-N, PPP, PML-Q, JUI and JI.

Separately, the PTI's Hazara division also chimed in, calling for the establishment of a sub-secretariat in the region — again on the model of south Punjab — as a prelude to the commencement of constitutional formalities needed for a new province. The party, which rules KP, has also urged the provincial assembly, which in 2014 had adopted a resolution calling for a separate province for the people of Hazara, to support the demand. With the government now actively pursuing its plans to carve out a new province comprising the southern districts of Punjab, it cannot reject similar calls, made on the basis of geography, language, culture, ethnicity, lack of development, etc, from other regions. Some feel that the division of the existing federating units into several smaller units is essential to improve the quality of governance, administration and service delivery. The genie is now out of the bottle. The only

way to handle it is to initiate a wider public debate to develop a national consensus on the direction in which we want to move.

Religious precautions

WITHOUT a doubt, the novel coronavirus has affected routine life around the globe like few events in modern history. In a globalised world few countries are left unaffected, with over 180,000 people infected and more than 7,000 fatalities.

Countries and cities around the world are opting for lockdown to stop the spread of the contagion, as this is being seen as the best method to prevent more infections. Schools, offices and commercial centres around the world — including in Pakistan — are closed or in the process of shutting down, while large gatherings are being discouraged.

Read: Tweaking the Azaan and other measures Muslim countries have taken to combat the virus

Keeping these developments in mind, the issue of congregational prayers needs serious attention, with the state, ulema and common people all playing their part to adjust religious rituals in order to curb the spread of COVID-19.

In Pakistan, as elsewhere around the Muslim world, hundreds of people attend daily prayers at large neighbourhood mosques. This number is in the thousands during Friday prayers, especially in the larger mosques. Considering the fact that worshippers are in such close proximity during daily prayers in mosques, it is incumbent on religious leaders and the state to come up with a strategy that protects people's health and lives until the threat of the virus subsides.

There have been various suggestions. For example, the Pakistan Ulema Council has issued a fatwa calling for all political and religious gatherings to be postponed, Friday prayers to be shortened, and prayers to be held in open spaces etc. However, the Punjab chief minister assured a delegation of clerics on Monday that mosques would not be closed in the country's most populous province. Considering the severity of the situation, the state must understand the risk to religious congregations, including those who gather in places of worship.

The state can review how other Muslim countries are dealing with the crisis. Egypt, Iran and Oman have all suspended Friday prayers while the UAE has

temporarily shuttered all places of worship. The Saudi government, too, has stopped congregational prayers in its mosques while placing curbs on umrah. In fact, images of the Holy Kaaba without people performing the tawaf around it have brought home the severity of the crisis.

If such stringent measures have been taken in Islam's holiest sites, then the authorities here should have no qualms about altering daily routines temporarily to keep people healthy and possibly save lives. At the very least, the ulema in Pakistan must consider temporarily limiting the number of daily worshippers in mosques and suspending congregational prayers on Friday, in keeping with the example of other Muslim states in these trying times.

Decisions need to be taken rationally, not emotionally, which is why religious scholars and the government must come up with a plan to address issues of public worship during the virus pandemic without further delay.

Rampant child abuse

EACH year, the child protection advocacy group Sahil announces its findings on the scale of the abuse that children endure in this country; the data is collected by looking into newspaper reports on the sexual abuse of children (including rape and attempted rape), child marriage, and abducted and missing children. In its most recent statement, foraging through 84 newspapers, Sahil noted that a disturbing 2,846 cases were reported across the country in the previous year. In other words, approximately eight children were subjected to abuse each day of 2019, with more than half being girls (54pc). Prior to that, the figure was even higher at a staggering 3,832 in 2018 — the same year the body of young Zainab Ansari was found in a garbage heap in Kasur; she had been brutally raped and murdered by her captor. The incident sparked protests and demands for accountability across the country. To some degree, it also changed the way we think about the issue of sexual abuse of children, and finally led to the passage of the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Bill by the National Assembly and the Senate in recent weeks. While these figures may send a chill down the spine, they are likely only scratching the surface, as many other cases go unreported. It is only in recent years that a culture of talking about sexual abuse and exploitation has been encouraged in Pakistan, and that too only in certain sections of society. Many other stories will never see the light of day. It may even

shock the more naive and insulated amongst us to learn about the exact scale of the problem, or about the capacity for evil in 'ordinary' people.

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups in any society, lacking the vocabulary, clear understanding, and often the support they need to confront their abusers. From a young age, they are taught not to question authority — the adults in their midst — and often suffer alone, suppressing whatever horrors they are made to endure in silence. Many abusers are from within the family, or close to the family members, earning and abusing their trust. In Sahil's most recent data, the majority of children that were subjected to abuse were between the ages of six and 15, but there were some even under the age of one. Let the horror of that figure sink in.

COVID-19 & prisoners

IDEALLY, a prison population should be easier to isolate than the general population because its interaction with the outside world is limited and can be further restricted. The Sindh government has taken a number of steps to ensure 'social distancing' to prevent community transmission of COVID-19. However, the provincial prison authorities have a considerable challenge on their hands. As reported in this paper, the risk is not from visitors who communicate with the inmates across a glass partition, meaning there is no physical contact between them. The story also quoted IGP Prisons, Sindh, as saying that among other measures, he has suggested that where possible trial proceedings should be conducted via video link. This would address the risk of prisoners being brought to court in vans so inadequate in number that inmates often end up being packed together like sardines.

However, the vulnerability lies in the fact that jail staff come into regular contact with those behind bars. Unless they take proper precautions before they do so, it could ravage the prison population. Jails in Pakistan are shockingly overcrowded. According to a report presented in November last year to the Supreme Court, there are 114 prisons across the country with 77,275 inmates against a combined capacity of 57,742. At the same time, onsite medical facilities are less than satisfactory. About half the sanctioned posts for jail medical staff are lying vacant, and medical equipment and ambulances are in short supply. This makes for an environment highly conducive to the spread of disease. As per recent data

collected by an Islamabad High Court-appointed commission, close to 2,400 prisoners already suffer from chronic, contagious diseases such as hepatitis, HIV and tuberculosis. It is therefore vital that preventive measures be put in place immediately such as releasing low-risk prisoners who are over 65 years of age, minors, petty offenders and those with existing serious illnesses. By definition, a prison population is a hostage group and the coronavirus could wreak havoc behind bars.

State Bank's rate cut

THERE has been a strong reaction to the cut of 75 basis points in the policy rate announced by the State Bank of Pakistan on Tuesday, with industry leaders decrying the move as 'too little too late'. As demand and cash flows at businesses plummet, people deserve to know why the State Bank is continuing to approach the question of the interest rate as if it is business as usual. Even without the coronavirus-related challenge and the sharp slowdown in business activity that has resulted from the fight against this menace, the market was expecting a rate cut somewhere between 50bps and 100bps. As it turns out, the bank has met the market midway within the expected band. But industry leaders say that times are now extraordinary and they need further support to keep the economy afloat. They point to central bank actions in the US and other jurisdictions where rates have been cut sharply to argue that a large-scale stimulus now needs to be worked out to prevent economic collapse and the resultant unemployment.

These are indeed extraordinary times and the challenges of the day do call for the commitment of more resources. But the State Bank should resist the pressure from the business community that these resources be spent on them in the hope that they will keep jobs intact with the assistance. Instead of lavishing scarce fiscal and monetary resources of the state on the business and industrial elites of the country, the government and the central bank should target this assistance to the poor and the health authorities; this is where help is needed more than anywhere else. The State Bank's decision to provide financing support for the procurement of ventilators is one example. The Benazir Income Support Programme can also be used to ramp up targeted assistance to the poor, for awareness-raising as well as material support in the coming days. But providing

the rich with a 'stimulus' in the hope that this will result in job creation or income support for the working poor should not be the strategy.

With that in mind, the State Bank did the right thing to implement a meagre cut in interest rates at this time. The other countries that are using the monetary lever to stimulate their economies are not in the midst of a massive adjustment and can afford their respective stimulus programmes. But a stimulus of that sort in Pakistan, especially in today's context, will do little to support the working class and the poor, and, in fact, could inflict significant damage on the economy through greater exchange rate stress, widening fiscal deficit and depleting reserves. If we are to commit our resources so painfully accumulated since the adjustment began, it would be better to target them directly to the poor.

Message of unity

IN a recent media interview, Prime Minister Imran Khan underlined the need for global unity in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, which has caused a huge humanitarian crisis across the world. He was spot on when he said that the virus would wreck developing economies, asking the richer nations to write off the debts owed by poorer countries. In the same vein, he urged the international community to lift the crippling sanctions against Iran, which has emerged as the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in the region and is struggling to control the disease's spread as its efforts are hampered by the sanctions imposed by the US. There is little room for disagreement with the prime minister when he declares Iran as a "classic example" of a country where the need to curb the virus is greater than politics.

The truth is that Mr Khan's message of more cooperation internationally could have been backed by a better example of unity at home. Sadly, his televised speech to the nation on Tuesday reflected the divisions within, both in its content and in the reactions it generated. There have been concerns that the prime minister was selective in his praise when it came to the handling of the crisis, and chose to omit from his list those who appeared to so many others to have worked valiantly in the face of great odds. A more generous review could have served the cause of national cohesion well in this hour of trial. The rest of his speech was focused on what actions his government had taken to contain the outbreak of COVID-19 and its plans to help businesses affected by the spread of the virus,

as he tried to reassure the people and allay public fears over the rising number of confirmed cases across the country. He ruled out the possibility of locking down the cities, saying that with such a large population and a huge number of poor, the country could not afford this extreme measure because thousands would starve. Mr Khan urged the people to support his government in the war against coronavirus. There's no denying the fact that 'we have to win this war as a nation' as he said. With his government coming under criticism over its slow response to the global pandemic, Pakistanis will need much more than words from its leaders as they brace for one of the biggest health crises the world has seen.

PSL postponement

THE hugely successful and entertaining Pakistan Super League extravaganza has come to an abrupt halt amid the growing threat of coronavirus, leaving millions of fans disappointed. Though there is talk by the PCB of rescheduling the two semi-finals and final soon, the feverish tempo that had gripped the nation has been lost. The reason why the event was halted may be understandable, but it is still a pity that the fifth season of the cash-rich PSL could not have had a more befitting climax. For the first time since its inception in 2016, the league had shunned UAE shores to fully relocate to Pakistan, a sign that the environment was secure for international players, especially with matches planned in four cities, and that the country was ready to shake off years of being a pariah in the cricketing world. That the league emerged handsomely from it all is a credit to the PCB and security personnel. It broke attendance records with nearly all the matches played to packed houses. Besides, the month-long carnival remained incident-free and saw foreign players and officials praise the competition and hospitality. Viewership skyrocketed to over 120m across the globe, delighting broadcasters and sponsors.

More importantly, it provided a golden opportunity for Pakistan's cricketers to showcase their talent in front of their home crowd and on their own turf. With the World Twenty20 scheduled for October this year in Australia and hawk-eyed selectors looking to shortlist potential match-winners, the players have fought hard to prove their supremacy while competing alongside three dozen international superstars. It must be said that by virtue of being commercially successful, the PSL has lent extraordinary credibility to the T20 format. The league has been a hit not so much because of the format of the game as the

format of the tournament where no one team emerges as a clear favourite until the play-offs to keep the suspense going. Hopefully, PSL's brand of cricket will achieve more landmarks in the years to come.

The crisis deepens

PAKISTAN arrived at a grim, if inevitable, milestone on Wednesday in its battle against COVID-19 when two of those known to be infected succumbed to the disease. The deaths occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and, contrary to what appears to be the general pattern of fatalities worldwide, the individuals were well under 60 years of age. As is the case with most of the confirmed cases in Pakistan, they both had a recent travel history. Last week, however, we entered the next stage of this pandemic when the first case of community transmission was confirmed in Karachi. That number is bound to rise, perhaps exponentially, with each passing day.

This is no time for politics or platitudes. It is a moment that calls for our leadership to rise above their differences and formulate a coordinated response that can make efficient and judicious use of available resources. At the moment, there is a discrepancy between the numbers of confirmed cases released by the Control and Command Centre set up to deal with the crisis and those given by provincial governments, which are possibly more up to date. While Sindh has shown itself to be commendably responsive to the multi-faceted challenge posed by COVID-19, and KP has begun rolling out a coherent strategy, there is on the federal level a sense of disjointedness, a perceptible lack of direction. In a society whose bonds are already frayed through divisive narratives, a national emergency such as this unless handled intelligently can exacerbate pre-existing cleavages. Although Prime Minister Imran Khan addressed the nation on Tuesday, there should be on his part more frequent communication with the public to inform them of the steps his government is taking in conjunction with the provinces. He must also explain why some of the measures that may temporarily cause major disruption in people's social and spiritual routines are necessary in the present situation.

Rapid transmission of COVID-19 has been checked in China and South Korea through lockdowns. Such a drastic step, given the realities of Pakistan, would cause untold misery to the multitudes that survive on daily wages or those with

small businesses dependent on a steady income to make ends meet. However, there may come a point when the government decides it has no choice but to impose such a lockdown at least in some parts of the country. In any case, the closure of markets and schools — places where hawkers tend to find customers — has already begun to impact the poor. An intervention by the state is urgently required. In concert with provincial dispensations, the government must devise a streamlined plan of action that also co-opts the private sector — including organisations already engaged in charitable work — so that efforts are not replicated and equitable distribution of relief goods is ensured. Low-income families must be provided the wherewithal to make it through this unfolding nightmare.

NAB & the judiciary

CHIEF Justice of the Islamabad High Court Athar Minallah has expressed anger at a report of the National Accountability Bureau and accused it of trying to scandalise and blackmail honourable judges. During the hearing of a petition filed by former federal minister Akram Durrani for pre-arrest bail, a NAB investigation officer presented a report which contained names of some IHC judges and other judicial officers who had allegedly been given out-of-turn allotment of government accommodations. Chief Justice Minallah told the NAB official that if there had been any discrepancy, then NAB should have filed a reference for misconduct against the judges in the Supreme Judicial Council. He warned the NAB official that no judge in this court would be blackmailed.

This is not the first time that the IHC has expressed annoyance over the role of NAB. Earlier, the honourable court had berated NAB officials for their policy of arresting accused personnel without any solid reason. In various bail hearings, the judges have also grilled NAB prosecutors for their failure to provide substantive evidence that would explain the need for keeping people incarcerated. Time and again, it has been seen that NAB has turned in an unconvincing performance in court and has been unable to provide solid arguments to defend its weak investigation and prosecution. The number of people criticising NAB has been increasing steadily and there is a general consensus within parliament that the NAB Ordinance, which gives sweeping powers to the accountability bureau, and especially its chairman, needs to be amended. The opposition parties have worked out a draft of these amendments

and the treasury benches have supported the need for reforming the accountability body. However, things have not progressed beyond this stage and there is no agreement on what exactly needs to be amended and according to what timelines. In the meantime, NAB officials continue to exercise their powers of detention at will. The criticism from the court reinforces the need for checking the excesses of NAB and bringing its powers within a framework that protects the fundamental rights of citizens. The reform process will also need to address other issues that plague NAB officers including how capacity can be enhanced so that investigations are done professionally on the basis of solid evidence that can withstand judicial scrutiny. The sooner this reform is done, the better it will be for our system, otherwise the country would be better off without such a controversial body.

Foot-in-mouth syndrome

EYEBROWS were raised when Punjab Information and Culture Minister Fayyazul Hassan Chohan was reinstated to his position in December. Last March, the PTI announced that the provincial government had removed the minister from his post following derogatory remarks he had made about a religious minority. Nonetheless, the generous of spirit believe in second chances, and Mr Chohan was given one to redeem himself with. He instead chose to squander that opportunity by directing his vitriolic tongue at an even more vulnerable group of people. Addressing a press conference on Tuesday, the minister claimed that people who engage in panic buying and hoarding during the COVID-19 pandemic will be 'punished' by God by bearing offspring with disabilities. Such a regressive and damaging statement, rightly slammed by many including Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, is utterly unbecoming of a public office-bearer, let alone one responsible for 'information and culture'. By the same logic, one may ask what the people of Punjab have done to deserve such a minister.

Besides being hurtful to Pakistanis (adult and children alike) with disabilities, and their loved ones, Mr Chohan is misinformed to believe that disability is a divine curse. Disability can affect anyone, at any time in life and due to any number of reasons. At a time when the public is fraught with anxiety, the last thing this society needs is for its leaders to display callousness and lack of empathy for others. This is not our 'culture'. In fact, our culture demands that we call on each

other to work collectively and ensure the most vulnerable among us — including people with disabilities — are supported in these difficult times. German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently displayed such leadership when, instead of haranguing people by unleashing a volley of abuse at the ‘sinners’ among us, she spoke of the need for “solidarity and reason”. Mr Chohan may have offered a token apology for his latest bilious statement, but it seems that he still falls short of demonstrating the kind of moral leadership this country needs right now.

Time for unity

WITH a gesture that has become something of a rarity in our polarised national discourse, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has announced a ‘no criticism policy’ with regard to Prime Minister Imran Khan and his government. Urging increased coordination and unity between the centre and the provinces, Mr Bhutto-Zardari said, “We should not waste our energies over criticism, the blame game and political point-scoring. It’s not the time to criticise the prime minister and I would not blame him or anyone. Instead, I should hope that he and every single citizen of Pakistan can win this fight.” The revelation came as the federal and provincial governments battle the unprecedented challenges unleashed by the fast-spreading Covid-19, which has the potential to devastate global healthcare infrastructure and economies.

Given how toxic political rivalries can be in Pakistan, the ‘no criticism policy’ is a welcome and sensible step at a time when the country — and in fact the world — needs extraordinary leadership. This is a pandemic that takes no prisoners. In multiple countries, the effects of the outbreak have put immense pressure on public health systems and emergency services. Economic growth, too, has been severely affected, as lockdowns prevent regular business and workers are kept in their homes. In Pakistan, with nearly 500 confirmed cases and at least three reported deaths, Covid-19 is steadily testing the resources and capacity of a system which is far less sophisticated than that found in developed countries. Still, even with Pakistan’s economic and infrastructural limitations, the response of the provincial governments, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular, has been impressive. Sindh has recorded the highest numbers of confirmed cases in the country, and its political leadership has done well to learn from other countries and enforce closure where possible. On social media, both KP and Sindh spokespersons are active in messaging and engagement and are visible in

fighting misinformation. These are timely steps in a battle that is colossal and multipronged, but one that can perhaps be won if the political leadership is on one page and sound decisions are taken.

As reports of shortage of protective gear for medical staff around the country increase with more and more people testing positive, the centre and provinces must sit together and decide how to overcome this challenge. It is imperative to procure testing kits and protective gear, and the NDMA chairman yesterday gave details on the availability of these. In the case that many doctors are infected, the government should prepare a contingency plan as other countries have done by calling on retired medical officers to return to duty. Circumstances demand working in tandem towards making resources available and containing the spread. As the world grapples with frightening new realities in the war against Covid-19, it would serve humanity well if our leaders demonstrate solidarity and work together.

Iran's crisis

COVID-19 is pushing the healthcare systems of even some of the world's most developed states to the edge, with governments and medical professionals battling to prevent infections from rising every day.

Meanwhile, the threat to less-developed states is even greater, as dilapidated health systems in these countries means that unless stringent measures are taken, a disaster is likely.

Considering the situation, all states should be expected to put aside petty differences and combine forces against the coronavirus — a foe that knows no borders.

However, it is clear that some in the international community are bent upon enforcing measures that can only be described as cruel and inhuman in such times of global crisis.

The US, for example, has refused to ease sanctions on Iran despite the fact that the Islamic Republic is amongst the countries hardest hit by the virus.

“Our policy of maximum pressure on the regime continues,” Brian Hook, Washington's point man for Iranian affairs, has said.

Even in normal circumstances it could be argued that American sanctions against Iran are wrong and unjustified.

But as Tehran grapples with a severe health crisis, there is absolutely no justification for the US to bully others in order to prevent help getting to Iranians.

There has been valid criticism, even from within the Iranian establishment, that the authorities were not being transparent about the number of infections and deaths.

Indeed, if the government had been more open about the situation it may have been easier to deal with it when Covid-19 first emerged.

However, for now this is an academic discussion; Iran needs urgent measures to combat the virus.

There have been some 1,500 deaths in the country, while the Iranian health ministry has said 50 people are being infected every hour.

Keeping this alarming situation in mind, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has urged world leaders to “show utmost compassion” and lift the sanctions against Iran.

Also China, where the outbreak started, has called for Iran to be given sanctions relief for humanitarian reasons.

America’s differences with Iran are geopolitical and ideological and go back decades.

However, at this time nations must move beyond such narrow considerations and think purely along humanitarian lines.

The dire situation in Iran demands that the world community work together to fight the contagion and let essential supplies into the country to save lives.

Rabies control

OVER the past few years, there seems to have been an alarming rise in the number of dog-bite cases in Sindh. This, despite repeated mass dog culling campaigns carried out by the authorities, which are not only cruel and barbaric, but evidently ineffective in controlling the stray dog population. Last year, the

Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre recorded 10,850 cases of dog-bites. The year before that, 8,000 cases were registered. While most dogs that bite are not rabid, there are still far too many such cases. In 2019, approximately 24 people died from the deadly virus in Sindh. Most were brought to hospitals in Karachi for treatment — days or months too late. Through no fault of their own, most citizens are still unaware of the exact steps to take after being bitten by a potentially rabid animal, while a shortage of rabies vaccines continues to plague the healthcare sector. Without quick and timely intervention — washing the wound with soap; receiving an immunoglobulin by a doctor; and being administered the rabies vaccine — the patient cannot be helped. In 99pc of all such cases, an agonising death is inevitable.

Following WHO's recommendations of carrying out vaccination and birth control of stray dogs — the only humane and effective way of controlling their population and minimising the chances of infectious disease — the Sindh government recently launched a helpline that would allow citizens to complain about the presence of stray dogs in their localities and aid the government in its trap-and-kill efforts. In January, the Sindh High Court pushed the government to hurry up. In that same month, three deaths from the deadly virus were reported in the province. Now, the SHC has once again intervened by directing Pemra to start airing public awareness messages about the helpline on all news channels in the province. This would certainly help, since most problems are rooted in a lack of either awareness or compassion.

Lessons for the world

IN a milestone development that brings a moment of much-needed relief in the coronavirus pandemic, China this week reported that it has no new local cases. While 39 new coronavirus cases have been confirmed in mainland China, all of them are 'overseas transmissions' carried by international travellers entering the country. This means that China's containment measures were successful and that it was able to effectively 'flatten the curve' — a term widely being used by experts which refers to slowing down the projected number of people who will contract Covid-19 over a period of time. A flatter curve assumes that the same number of people get infected, but over a longer period of time, which eases the burden on hospitals and medical staff.

As China documents fewer cases, it presents an opportunity for the world to learn lessons — both good and bad. To evaluate the country's approach to the pandemic, it is essential to look at the facts: between the end of December and mid-March, China reported over 81,000 confirmed cases with a death toll of 3,255. The regime responded to rapidly rising cases with a dramatic lockdown and enforced isolation — measures which initially were met with criticism around the globe. For instance, the world expressed shock at the authorities' decision to shut down Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak with a population of 11m, as experts were sceptical about the success and viability of what is possibly the biggest quarantine exercise in modern history. China was criticised as authoritarian as it went further and locked down the entire Hubei province of 60m in a dramatic show of power. But while the regime's draconian measures became the focus of headlines, the country's decisions to build temporary hospitals, deploy scores of medical workers, establish wide-scale screening and isolate infected individuals appear to have contributed largely to its successful response. In fact, its authoritarianism and initial lack of transparency — which included threats to those who tried to raise the alarm about Covid-19 early on — are factors which led to major deficiencies and the subsequent outbreak.

Here, it is important to look at the success of containment in South Korea, where transparency, openness and effective public-health decisions have been at the core of the response. After the 2015 outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, during which South Korea recorded 186 cases and 38 deaths, the country revamped its response systems to respiratory infections. Although Korea was criticised for its poor response to MERS, lessons learnt then were adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic: mass production of test kits, adequately equipped hospitals, infection control units, hygiene awareness campaigns and technological innovations. Its dedication to act early, make testing available and affordable, keep the public informed, trace and isolate and communicate social distancing kept the spread and death rate low. World leaders would do well to follow South Korea and China's example.

Death of miners

PAKISTAN has a poor record of upholding labour rights, but perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the coal mining sector. Horrific news of miners who are buried alive, inhale toxic gases, or get burnt to death inside their places of

work surfaces every few months. And yet it seems no action is taken to ensure humane working conditions, or hold owners to account for allowing such conditions to fester. Why else do such incidents keep recurring? Or do the cries of the miners fall on deaf ears? Are their lives inconsequential to those in power? Unfortunately, coal miners are some of the poorest and therefore the most exploited among the workforce. They often work with no safety equipment, receive negligible training, and are afforded few if any public holidays. In 2017, the Pakistan Institute of Labour and Research came up with a comprehensive list of recommendations to ensure basic health and safety standards in the mining sector. Some of the recommendations included: regularising all mines; granting permanent employment status to all miners, including those on contract; providing medical facilities, along with quarterly medical examinations for workers; setting up ventilation systems inside each mine; legislating on the amount of oxygen and temperature inside mines; ratifying ILO conventions and enforcing labour laws; covering mine work under social security and EOBI laws; monitoring methane and coal dust within mines; providing miners with necessary safety equipment; and ensuring miners receive the minimum wage and work no more than eight hours a day. Lastly, in the event of a fatal accident, the families of the victims must be provided compensation within a few days of the tragedy.

But this advice is not followed. Recently, seven miners were killed after yet another explosion ripped through a mine in Balochistan. Can readers imagine what would happen if such an 'accident' were to happen in another part of the world? For instance, in Turkey, which itself has a dismal record of ensuring safety for miners, hundreds of protesters took to the streets when 301 people perished in the country's most disastrous mine-related accident in 2014. A fire that broke out in a mine in Soma raged for two days. The government declared three days of mourning, while grief-stricken families and townspeople demonstrated their anger when the prime minister callously said the situation was 'normal'. Why do we not witness similar outrage in Pakistan? Perhaps our collective conscience is dead.

Overcrowded prisons

AS the country grapples with the grave challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, the Islamabad High Court has taken a welcome initiative to provide

relief to the overwhelmed criminal justice system, and ordered some necessary precautions.

The court has directed that 1,362 under-trial prisoners be released from Adiala jail; the cases of these individuals pertain to minor crimes and are pending before the high court. It has also ordered the Islamabad police not to make, for the foreseeable future, any further arrests of those involved in petty offences. The release has been ordered in an attempt to reduce overcrowding in jails and regulate visitation for those who cannot be released, as part of the larger action plan by the government to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

At present, 5,001 prisoners are incarcerated in Adiala jail against its sanctioned capacity of 2,174. Adiala jail, like other prisons in the country with their squalid living conditions and high turnover, could potentially become a hotbed for the spread of the virus, endangering the lives of not just the prisoners but thousands of others connected with the criminal justice system including their families.

The release of under-trial prisoners involved in petty crimes will also, to some extent, reduce the unnecessary movement and exposure of prisoners, police and court officials, thus helping limit the chance of their being infected by the dangerous virus that has gripped the world.

According to the Islamabad deputy commissioner, and representatives of the Islamabad police and federal health ministry, the release of under-trial prisoners is in line with a national action plan formulated by the government under WHO's declaration of a 'public emergency of international concern'. If indeed this is the case, then other high/superior courts should also make haste in taking similar steps to lessen the deadly impact of the coronavirus outbreak in the country.

Every move aimed towards reducing its spread will add up in eventually being able to beat the pandemic.

Incentive package

THE prime minister has now announced formally that an incentive package is being prepared for industry to help them weather the severe disruptions in demand as well as their operations with the spread of the coronavirus. From his points mentioned during his interaction with the media on Friday, we know that the construction sector and textile exporters are high on the list of industries that

are in focus as the incentive package is hammered out. The reasons he gave are that construction creates employment for daily wagers, a group that is high on his list of priorities, and textiles brings in foreign exchange. It is not known yet what size and shape this incentive package will take and more specifically how it will ensure that the group the prime minister is trying to reach is targeted; all this will be known only when the details have been made announced.

At the outset, though, it is important to underline that this is not the best direction to take. If the plight of the daily wagers in the event of a slowdown is the key concern here then the resources and energies of the state should be spent in quickly developing an income transfer scheme to put funds directly into the pockets of this group during a lockdown. The Sindh government is already moving in this direction, and public-sector enterprises are drawing up lists of daily wagers who work for them to see if funds can be transferred to these people using mobile payments to help them weather a lockdown. It is not difficult for the state to build such a database in a short period of time if it seeks out the cooperation of industry and labour leaders, as well as members of the research community who have experience working on social protection schemes.

It is true that industry needs support and it is also true that many developed countries are announcing stimulus packages for their economy. But as the top leadership itself keeps pointing out, Pakistan is a poor country and its response does not brook comparison with the examples that are cited. There is now little doubt that a surge of infected people is coming our way and in the middle of such an outbreak the hand of the state may well be forced into announcing and enforcing lockdowns. This is the time to focus all our energies on preparing for the surge by strengthening public health systems, building targeted income transfer schemes to help the poor to weather the foreseeable lockdowns, and to ramp up public messaging on social distancing. The federal government's response in all three of these areas is woefully inadequate. Focusing on transferring state resources to industrialists and property developers, especially in the name of protecting daily wagers, is the wrong direction to be heading in.

Militant attacks

A TROUBLING uptick in small-scale militant attacks in the tribal areas has become evident. On Wednesday night, two constables laid down their lives in the

line of duty when armed men attacked a police station, also manned by Frontier Corps personnel, in the Orakzai tribal district. The assailants escaped after the assault. In the early hours of the same day, an army officer and three soldiers were martyred during an intelligence-based operation against a terrorists' hideout in Dattakhel in North Waziristan. Seven terrorists were also killed. About two weeks ago, on March 10, a colonel was martyred in the course of another IBO in Tank district bordering South Waziristan.

There is good reason to be concerned. Local residents for several months have been warning that militants have been trickling back into their areas, perhaps attempting to establish a foothold in their old stomping grounds. Dattakhel — along with Mir Ali and Miramshah, also in North Waziristan — was once considered a hub of TTP activity. In 2011, it was the target of the first drone strike after the Raymond Davis affair ended with his release: 44 people were killed, leading to widespread protests across the country. Wednesday's attack on the army personnel in Dattakhel is suspected to have been carried out by men belonging to the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group which is believed to be sheltering in Afghanistan. Gul Bahadur, who had once negotiated an ill-fated peace deal with the Pakistan Army, was the head of a syndicate of various militant outfits before Zarb-i-Azb forced them to flee across the border. As yet, there is no evidence that the Afghan government has taken any action against such groups whose resilience drives them to seek any opportunity to regain lost ground. The increasing number of small-scale attacks in Pakistan indicates either they are still managing to slip across the border, or that sleeper cells on this side have become more active. The gravity of the situation is further enhanced by the growing crisis in Pakistan on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. If the number of infections rise exponentially, it is conceivable that the government may have to impose a lockdown in some parts of the country. As in other countries, the measure may require the army to be called out to enforce it strictly, stretching the security forces' resources further. One hopes that planning for the coming weeks takes this reality into account.

Save the pangolin

THE first 41 victims of the novel coronavirus had one thing in common: more than half of them had either worked at, or recently visited, a market in Wuhan, China, which traded in live animals. While the original source of Covid-19 is still

uncertain, it is largely accepted that the disease was spread to humans via an animal host. At first, experts suspected bats to be the potential carriers. Later, growing evidence suggested that pangolins were the primary source of the outbreak. But even without clear answers, it is evident that stricter controls need to be enforced on the wildlife industry and the illegal trade of live animals and animal parts for food, medicine, clothing, decoration or research purposes. The infamous market in Wuhan has now been sealed, and China has imposed a ban on trading and eating 'non-aquatic' animals. However, while wildlife conservationists welcome the ban, those paying attention to the fine print have pointed out 'loopholes' which would allow traffickers to continue bad practices, potentially endangering humanity once again. After all, Covid-19 is not the first zoonotic disease to rattle the 21st century. Both SARS and Ebola were traced to animals, as was HIV, which largely terrorised the previous century.

Even if the pangolin is found not to be the source of the recent pandemic, there must be greater intercontinental efforts to uphold an international ban on the trade of the critically endangered species — often referred to as “the world’s most trafficked mammal” — poached for its scales and meat that are in demand in China and parts of Africa. While Pakistan is fortunate to host diverse wildlife, attitudes towards the pangolin range from indifference to fear and demonisation, with several instances of locals attacking and killing the notoriously shy animal. Others try to profit off it. On Thursday, for instance, wildlife officials seized a pangolin from poachers in Punjab. In the midst of a pandemic and a climate crisis, if greater sense does not set in, perhaps we are doomed.

Lockdown begins

ON Monday, Pakistan moved much closer to a full lockdown in its attempts to limit the spread of Covid-19 by breaking the chain of transmission through physical contact. With the extension of government-ordered shutdowns to KP and Punjab, the entire country has now been closed down more extensively than before as only essential services will be allowed to remain open. The country has been in some degree of lockdown ever since the NSC meeting on March 13, which ordered the complete closure of educational institutions, restricted international travel, barred large public gatherings, and shut down the western borders. Many things have happened since. The government has since effectively 'quarantined' the country by totally barring international travel and

closing its borders with Iran and Afghanistan for daily public traffic. Train operations have also been reduced along with curtailment of intercity bus services as the number of people infected with the virus has spiked sharply. Sindh has taken more aggressive measures with a view to forcing people to stay home as the province has reported the highest number of Covid-19 patients, or 45pc of all confirmed cases. Punjab went for a slightly 'less harsh lockdown', shutting down government and private institutions, offices, malls, restaurants and other non-essential services, taking public transport off the road, banning pillion riding on motorbikes, and permitting only emergency intra-city commute as the province saw its tally of Covid-19 patients rise to 246 in just a few days, far more quickly than the rest of the country.

Overall, the number of cases have surged past 800 from just 19 on March 11. The health authorities had detected the first two cases on Feb 26; both individuals had returned from Iran. The graph has since been depicting a much steeper rise in the number of confirmed cases when compared to many other countries, leaving the government with no choice but to lock down the country as the number of infected people with no recent foreign travel history also increases.

Meanwhile, we have been witnessing an unnecessary debate over whether or not a total lockdown is justified. Both arguments are valid. Those worried about job losses and food security for the poor have opposed the demand for a lockdown, with Prime Minister Imran Khan supporting this viewpoint. Yet he is not averse to a lockdown if the situation gets out of hand as in countries like Italy, Spain and Iran. Painful as it may be, a full lockdown is the only remedy available so far to 'flatten the curve', ensure better care for those infected, and save lives. Until a cure or a vaccine is discovered, all stakeholders need to rise above their petty political interests to cooperate rather than indulge in recriminations. The government needs to stay a step ahead of the disease and proactively deal with the situation that is constantly evolving.

Taliban-Kabul talks

CONSIDERING that the Afghan Taliban have often referred to the Western-backed government in Kabul as a 'puppet regime', the fact that both sides communicated via videoconference on Sunday is something to be welcomed. While it may not herald the beginning of an 'official' dialogue between the two

warring parties, it should definitely be considered an ice-breaker. The conversation centred on the exchange of prisoners — a key sticking point which has threatened to scuttle the peace deal signed between Washington and the Taliban in February. While the Afghan authorities were initially reluctant to release any Taliban prisoners, that stance may be about to change. As per a Taliban spokesman, “... there were initial agreements on some issues regarding the release of prisoners” during Sunday’s discussion. Both sides hold thousands of each other’s men, and the mutual exchange of prisoners could be a confidence-building measure to further the intra-Afghan dialogue. Officials from the US and Qatar had helped set up the videoconference.

Clearly, it appears that the Americans, eager to get their troops out of Afghanistan, are using all the tactics in their playbook to ‘convince’ the Kabul government to help save the deal with the Taliban. The first batch of American troops has already left Afghanistan, while Washington is trying to bring together rival Afghan power elites to put up a united face in front of the Taliban. Despite the global coronavirus pandemic, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Kabul on Monday to try and make Afghan President Ashraf Ghani — who won the presidential election — and his arch-rival and former CEO of the country Abdullah Abdullah — who ‘inaugurated’ himself on the same day as Mr Ghani — patch up. The Americans know that if there is infighting in the Afghan government, the peace deal will be worthless, as the Taliban will battle all other pretenders to Kabul’s throne for power as soon as the last American soldier leaves. Therefore, to prevent further chaos in the country, unity is needed in Kabul to show the Taliban and the world that the dispensation in Afghanistan is legitimate and functioning. Moreover, dialogue between the Kabul power elite and the Taliban should continue, for any peace deal the militants sign with foreign powers will not amount to much unless all Afghan stakeholders are on board. To prevent a return to chaos in Afghanistan, the focus should now be on the intra-Afghan dialogue.

World Tuberculosis Day

AS many parts of the world observe complete or partial lockdowns to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, another infectious disease — tuberculosis — silently continues to wreak havoc in a number of developing countries. World Tuberculosis Day is observed on March 24, but this year concerns about the disease will probably be overtaken by coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. Considered to be a malaise of poorer countries where malnutrition, poor living

conditions and access to healthcare remain difficult, TB is one of the top 10 leading causes of death worldwide. In 2018 alone, the disease claimed around 1.5m lives across the world. The worst-affected countries include Pakistan, where the disease burden is considered to be the fifth highest in the world. According to WHO, around 510,000 new TB cases are recorded in the country every year, with at least 15,000 of them being cases of multidrug-resistant TB, the fourth highest prevalence globally. Given the fact that treatment for TB is already of long duration and expensive, the high prevalence of MDR TB adds another dimension of difficulty in the attempts to stem the disease.

Worrying as it is, the high prevalence of TB in Pakistan — including among young women of childbearing age — is doubly of concern as stories of critical patients of Covid-19 from around the world reveal that the coronavirus has a tendency to attack the respiratory systems of people with weak immunity and compromised health. With the number of Covid-19 patients in the country steadily rising, the new disease might prove to be a death sentence for the thousands of TB patients in the country whose lungs have already been ravaged by the disease. The loss of lives at the hands of the pandemic notwithstanding, it is still a matter of great concern that TB persists so widely among the Pakistani population. It will continue to kill more people than Covid-19, if sufficient measures are not taken to screen patients and curb its spread.

Incentive package

IT was never going to be a simple balancing act to perform, but the government seems to have done it right.

More details about the trillion-rupee-plus package announced by the prime minister on Tuesday are needed before its true impact can be assessed.

But in walking the tightrope between providing direct assistance to the people and helping industry to weather the tough times that lie ahead, it seems to lean in favour of direct assistance without forgetting industry.

It was stated that for the construction sector, a separate package would come later.

Presumably, the lockdowns announced by the provincial governments have halted construction activity, so coming up with any incentive package for the sector at this time would have no beneficial impact.

For industry, the package is structured to accelerate the release of sales tax refunds and calls for deferring debt service payments.

This is smartly structured because it minimises the cash outlay on the part of the government, but will help improve the liquidity position of the companies that benefit from it, thereby enabling them to maintain their payrolls.

The challenge now is targeting.

Deferred debt-service payments, assuming the government is successful in arranging this for the private sector, means only those who access bank credit will benefit.

Likewise with sales tax refunds.

There is an allocation of Rs100bn for small and medium-size enterprises and agriculture, but the mechanism through which this will be allocated is yet to be announced.

Aside from this, an amount of Rs400bn seems to be allocated for direct support to the working poor; half of the sum is supposed to preserve employment.

Once again, the allocation is good, but the mechanism will be key to success.

If the government intends to put this money into the pockets of rich industrialists under the assumption they will pass it on to the workers as remuneration, then room for abuse and capture is substantial.

It would be worth its while to find ways to directly transfer these funds to the working poor.

As time goes by, it is possible these funds will seem insufficient.

Once disbursement gets under way, the government is also likely to be swamped with complaints and loud calls for more, especially from industry.

Given the unprecedented nature of the challenge we are now moving towards, it would be entirely appropriate for the government to focus its energies directly on the people rather than seeking to route its assistance through industry.

This is a good time to rapidly increase its capacity for targeted assistance, and given the technologies available today, especially with the National Socioeconomic Registry of the Benazir Income Support Programme, as well as myriad other targeted support schemes, this can be achieved.

There is time enough to ramp up the targeting and it should be used for this purpose.

No time for war

ASKING for an end to hostilities between nations, UN Secretary General António Guterres has called on warring countries to jointly fight the battle against Covid-19 instead. “The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war,” he said. “That is why today, I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.” From the time the first Covid-19 death was confirmed in January 2020 in Wuhan, there have been nearly 400,000 novel coronavirus cases worldwide, and over 16,000 deaths. From developed states like the US, UK and Italy to developing countries like Pakistan, the disease is crippling healthcare infrastructure and economies across the world. As a result, governments everywhere are forced to make difficult choices to protect citizens. In countries such as Syria and Yemen which are torn by war, the destruction of infrastructure means the chances of fatalities are even higher than average.

If there were ever a point in modern history that called for an immediate stop to conflict, sanctions and political hostilities, it is now. The virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity. As Mr Guterres said, this is the fight of our lifetimes. The situation should compel world leaders like US President Donald Trump to demonstrate leadership instead of escalating tensions. Mr Trump has multiple times dubbed Covid-19 the ‘Chinese virus’ and US officials have indulged in a racially tinged blame game over the origins of the virus — words that are only dividing communities at a time when they need to be united. China, too, has hit back with equally myopic actions, with Beijing promoting a conspiracy theory that the US brought the coronavirus to Wuhan. Moreover, as countries suffer the consequences of China’s initial lack of transparency regarding the disease, the latter country is expelling US journalists. Meanwhile, the US sanctions on Iran, where Covid-19 has had a devastating impact, need to be eased immediately;

such action would help the world's (including America's) fight against the virus. In this regard, Ayatollah Khamenei's allegation that the virus "is specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians" is counterproductive. Leaders must remember that in a globalised world, the presence of the virus in any country will result in transmission and that if it is not curbed everywhere, it is a risk to all nations.

Police response

THE lockdown in Sindh that began on Monday can only be successful if the law-enforcement agencies are equal to the task. The first day saw the police briefly detain over 450 individuals considered to be violating the provincial government's directives. However, old habits can be difficult to discard and entrenched mindsets resistant to change. A picture in this paper yesterday showed a group of young men in a Karachi locality being forced to sit on their haunches as penance for having defied the lockdown orders. It is commendable that the district DIG suspended the SHO responsible for meting out the humiliating punishment. Otherwise, this practice, and more — such as extorting people in exchange for turning a blind eye to their violating the lockdown — may well have started being replicated elsewhere in Sindh.

There is no denying the police are confronted with enormous challenges in trying to deal with this unprecedented emergency. However, the endemic abuses of power that have become part and parcel of their modus operandi may already be making themselves felt. Sadly, all the years of neglecting to transform the police into a credible, citizen-friendly institution that inspires public trust could add to the difficulties inherent in implementing the clampdown. The situation is particularly conducive to the police's tendency to profile citizens based on their perceived socioeconomic status and use brute force against certain sections of society. Also, when law-enforcement personnel are on the front line, and in a highly visible capacity, these malpractices become even more glaringly apparent. Of course, all of them are not culpable and are doing their job to the best of their training and capability. As a whole though, the police force needs clearer guidelines on how to deal with those who defy the lockdown orders. Detaining such individuals in a confined space is not a viable option given the objective is to prevent the contagion from spreading further. One hopes a clear course of action will become visible in the coming days.

A joint battle

TWO separate events in as many days have spawned hopes of closer coordination between Islamabad and the provinces, as well as the central government and the opposition political parties, in the country's fight against the rapid spread of the coronavirus infection. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Imran Khan rightly argued that no government could defeat the pandemic on its own. There was also little room for disagreement with him when he told a conference of parliamentary leaders of various political parties via video link that the war against the deadly virus had to be won collectively as a nation. Although he stuck to his previous stand that Pakistan could not afford to impose curfew as an extreme social-distancing measure because of its potentially adverse impact on the poor and those workers whose livelihood depends on daily wages, he indicated his willingness to discuss every suggestion that the opposition political parties would want to put on the table to successfully fight off the disease and minimise its impact on the nation's economy. This was a departure from the past, although the prime minister's all too brief appearance caused consternation among opposition leaders. Mr Khan also said he planned to discuss his reservations regarding the impact of the shutdown and the suspension of intercity transport by the provinces on the economy and the poor segments of the population at a National Coordination Committee meeting today. One hopes that the meeting helps bridge the differences between the centre and provinces over a lockdown strategy to control the spread of the infection and improves coordination between them.

The other related development was the organisation of a multiparty conference held a day earlier at the call of the PPP. It was indeed a step forward in the efforts being made to bring all political forces together in the country's war against the deadly virus that has already infected over 1,000 people in the country besides killing reportedly eight people. Additionally, the virus has imposed massive costs on an already struggling economy and jobs. The moot called for devising a national action plan with mutual consultation so that all political forces could jointly fight the battle against the coronavirus.

The participation of the political allies of the ruling PTI in the conference showed the extent to which politicians of all hues are missing a mechanism that could ensure coordination and facilitate the exchange of proposals between the ruling

party and the opposition. The need for a political consensus to deal with the Covid-19 challenge cannot be overstated in the present situation. If there is a time to rise above political differences and parochial divisions, it is now. Pakistan like the rest of the world is in a state of war. And no politically divided nation has ever emerged victorious from a crisis, even of a much smaller magnitude than the present one.

Interest rate cut

IN an extraordinary development, the State Bank of Pakistan announced a large cut in the discount rate equal to 1.5 percentage points. This happened in an unscheduled meeting of the monetary policy committee that was called at short notice and deliberated while the prime minister and his team in Islamabad announced the details of the trillion-rupee-plus stimulus package. It was, by all accounts, an extraordinary day, with the government coming up with a mid-year stimulus package of unprecedented size together with the central bank announcing a rate cut, which, if coupled with the previous 75bps cut a week earlier, amounts to 2.25 percentage points, probably the single largest cut in over a decade. With both these announcements, the stabilisation that began under the auspices of the IMF programme now stands terminated and the government's hand has been forced to move towards supporting growth.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. Now that the decision to move towards stimulus has been made in so comprehensive a manner, the next thing to look out for is stimulus-induced instability. An example would be the exchange rate where the effects of the rate cut have been felt right away as the rupee fell by Rs2.6 to the dollar in the interbank market the very next day. The finance team may well have placed the bet that with oil prices crashing and a large deflation about to sweep the economy with collapsing demand, there is ample room to resort to extraordinary steps like steep rate cuts and ramped-up spending. There is no reason to fault them for having made this judgement call, because these are, after all, extraordinary times. But having made the judgement call, they must now show some fortitude in the face of the market reactions that will inevitably come. The finance team, now led by the finance adviser and the State Bank governor, must make their government colleagues aware of the risks of the moves that are being made, and ensure that the authorities do not panic if the market sees sharp swings in the coming days. These swings will be there

wherever the market is still operational, stock trading and the exchange rate being key. Demands for shoring up the exchange rate must now be managed, and those for a stock market bailout fund, which are sure to come at some point, must be fended off comprehensively.

Tokyo Olympics postponed

THE expected yet abrupt postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games due to the coronavirus pandemic has left the world of sport in a state of severe disappointment. Though calls for postponement of the Games from various quarters had grown louder over the past two weeks, sports federations and athletes around the world continued to train for the mega-event and the International Olympic Committee, while host Japan rebuffed such demands, simply because too much was at stake. However, the rapid escalation of coronavirus cases across the world compelled the IOC and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to review their stance and they subsequently postponed the Games on Tuesday. The IOC has said the Games will be held no later than the summer of 2021 and will still be called the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Apart from the period of the two World Wars that witnessed the cancellation of three Olympic Games — in 1916, 1940 and 1944 — this is the first time that the event has been postponed. Of course, no one is happy about the decision, since rescheduling the Olympic Games is a nightmare both financially and logistically. Needless to say, with so much uncertainty still surrounding the future of the pandemic, rescheduling the Games is a massive challenge. In putting together the 2020 Games, Japan reportedly spent a staggering \$12.6bn during a monumental process spanning nearly a decade on raising the stadia, the Olympic village, infrastructure, etc. Having said that, postponing the Olympics is the most rational decision in the given circumstances, since not only the lives of thousands of athletes and officials would be at stake, but also those of the estimated 40m visitors. Sports can create hope where once there was only despair, said the late Nelson Mandela, arguably the greatest leader of the 20th Century. It is important, therefore, that Japan and the rest of the world keep the Olympic dream alive and aim for an event better, bigger Olympic Games in 2021 to emerge triumphant from the current setback.

Al Azhar fatwa must be heeded

ONE of Islam's premier seats of learning, Al Azhar in Egypt, is considered by most Muslims to be the gold standard where matters of faith are concerned.

One would have hoped, therefore, that the fatwa by the institution permitting suspension of congregational prayers in Pakistan to control the spread of the coronavirus would have been heeded.

However, it seems that President Alvi's meeting yesterday with religious scholars across the country to discuss that possibility has not changed their stance.

The outcome, according to the government, is that prayers will be 'restricted' and the elderly and the sick advised to pray at home.

Such half-baked measures will cost us dearly.

Other Muslim countries — Saudi Arabia and Iran among them — have already suspended congregational prayers, even while members of Pakistan's clergy refused to countenance a measure that will save lives.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the kind of influence the religious lobby wields in Pakistan, the federal and provincial governments have been dithering over the issue.

However, Sindh, which has been the most proactive in handling the crisis, yesterday decided to discard its hitherto tentative approach and take the responsible step of temporarily banning all congregational prayers in the province.

Restricting person-to-person contact is the only way to disrupt the relentless pace of coronavirus transmission.

No lockdown can be effective if exceptions are made for certain types of gatherings, especially in a situation where even those who are asymptomatic can infect others.

Any place where people congregate is like a petri dish facilitating the spread of the contagion.

A substantial majority of cases so far recorded in the country can be traced to Pakistanis returning from pilgrimage to Iran; the rate of infection among them was exacerbated by the squalid conditions in which many were 'quarantined' in Taftan.

Then there was the first Covid-19 fatality in Pakistan, an individual already presenting with symptoms of the disease upon his return from Saudi Arabia after performing umrah.

At his village in KP, he attended a celebratory feast with 2,000 guests.

Reportedly, around 40 of 46 tests performed so far on those with whom he came into contact have turned out positive.

Another example is that of at least a dozen Tableeghi Jamaat members found to be infected after attending the Jamaat's annual conference in Raiwind where tens of thousands congregate.

Entire villages are being quarantined as more and more cases of community transmission are discovered.

To see what could lie in store for us, we need only look at the horrific scenes playing out in Europe, with hospitals struggling to cope and morgues filled to capacity.

Imagine that happening in a country like ours, where the health system at the best of times is appallingly inadequate.

If every loophole that allows close contact among people is not plugged, the worst of times lie before us.

Sikh killings

IN a bloody display of the havoc the self-styled Islamic State group is still capable of spreading, at least 25 people were massacred in an attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul on Wednesday. The attack was claimed by the terrorist group. Afghanistan is of course no stranger to violence, but the killings demonstrate that unless various contenders for power in the country get their act together, IS will exploit the vacuum of leadership to spread its tentacles further in the region. After all, it has been responsible for the savage acts of violence carried out in its Middle

Eastern heartland against both Muslims and followers of other faiths, in keeping with its brutal ideology. While the self-proclaimed caliphate has largely been routed in Syria and Iraq — where it initially emerged — it is now trying to establish itself in other ungoverned spaces, and Afghanistan offers a prime location unless a workable peace deal takes effect and all parties abide by it. Pakistan has condemned the attack on the Sikh place of worship, with the Foreign Office stressing that “such despicable attacks have no political, religious or moral justification”.

The fact is that unless there is intra-Afghan understanding and reconciliation — both between the Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah blocs, as well as the Afghan government and the Taliban — IS and other militant groups that do not believe in the political process will be free to spread havoc. That is why a lasting peace agreement between various Afghan factions is essential. Unfortunately, the power struggle playing out currently in Kabul does not offer much hope. While Mr Ghani was declared the winner of last September’s presidential election, his chief rival Mr Abdullah dismissed the results and has proclaimed himself leader of the country. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Kabul this week to try and patch things up between the two factions, but had to fly back to Washington without achieving much. Instead, he announced a cut of \$1bn in aid to Afghanistan as ‘punishment’, which is sure to hurt the cash-strapped country. “The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan,” Mr Pompeo told the media. Indeed, unless the Kabul elite achieve some sort of unity, the US peace deal with the Taliban will count for little as Afghan factions battle it out after the Americans leave. Such a situation will only favour IS and their ilk.

Media owner’s remand

AN accountability court has extended the physical remand of Jang group editor-in-chief Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman to NAB for another 15 days. A NAB prosecutor submitted an application to the court seeking further remand and argued that investigators wanted to record statements of some more officials, and therefore further custody of Mr Rehman was required. Given the nature of the case and the allegations made against Mr Rehman, it makes scant sense for NAB to hold him in custody. The investigations were in the initial stages and as such there was no real need for arresting Mr Rehman. In addition, he was fully cooperating with the

investigation and presenting himself to NAB whenever summoned. Arrests are justified when there is a genuine concern that the suspect will either abscond or be able to influence the course of the investigation from outside. None of these conditions applied to Mr Rehman and yet the chairman NAB found it necessary to sanction such an extreme step.

This is why the entire episode smacks of ulterior motives. It is no secret that the Jang Group has been critical of the present setup and has found itself out of favour for some time. It has also been deprived of official advertisements and has been enduring pressures of various kinds. In this backdrop, the arrest of Mr Rehman in a three-decade-old case, and that too in the very initial stages of investigation, casts dark shadows over the intentions of those who sanctioned it. The Pakistani media has been bearing the brunt of official ire for a while now, and the incarceration of Mr Rehman further fuels the impression. It would be in the fitness of things for NAB to cease demanding further remand as no good reason exists for it to keep Mr Rehman in custody. He deserves to be freed on bail so he can properly contest the charges against him in a court of law. By prolonging his detention without solid proof of any wrongdoing on his part, NAB is only earning a bad name for itself.

Sindh leads the way

IN SPITE of some good work done by stakeholders within their area of operation, the country remains divided over a national strategy to defeat the coronavirus pandemic, with the number of confirmed cases exceeding 1,300. Efforts are still dispersed despite warnings that the crisis could turn into a huge calamity if we do not get our act together. Luckily, there are examples of how to proceed in this calamity, and the leading role played by the Sindh government in the country's fight against Covid-19 should provide valuable lessons for both the central government and the other provinces. Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's proactive leadership has been appreciated both at home and abroad; Sindh was the first province in the country to forcefully highlight the lack of preparedness that exists at different levels when the virus was knocking at our door, and to draw the federal government's attention to the poor quality of screening of inbound passengers at airports, as well as the absence of quarantine facilities there. Sindh also pointed out the mishandling of the return of pilgrims from Iran, the epicentre of Covid-19 in the region, at a makeshift quarantine facility at the

Taftan border. Most of the initial, confirmed Covid-19 cases in the country, especially in Sindh, can be traced to the batch of pilgrims returning from Iran and allowed to leave for home without proper testing.

In many ways, the province has provided the other federating units and the central government with a roadmap to limit the spread of the coronavirus. It has tested people more aggressively and was the first province to implement a lockdown as an extreme social-distancing measure, despite strong opposition from Islamabad. It is also leading the others in restricting religious gatherings after the tablighi congregations in Lahore and near Islamabad proved to be another source of the Covid-19 illness. Even the first two confirmed cases of the illness in the Gaza Strip were traced to a tablighi gathering in Pakistan. In short, the ruling PPP in Sindh has done what few expected of it, and the other three provincial administrations, together with Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir, have mostly followed in its footsteps by taking certain actions, that though considered harsh for the poor, will help contain the spread of Covid-19 in their geographical jurisdictions.

Although the federal health adviser Dr Zafar Mirza has been proactive in coordinating with the provinces, it seems that the centre is still uncertain about a national strategy, given some of its concerns regarding a lockdown, such as the impact on the poor. But there can be no further dilly-dallying — especially in a country where people reject measures that are prescribed to protect them from injury. The war on Covid-19 cannot be fought effectively, let alone won, without developing a consensus and a national strategy — and no effort can succeed in isolation.

Debt plan

THE State Bank and the country's banks have moved fast to pre-empt rising calls for a moratorium on debt repayments from individuals and businesses. The key now lies in how many parties step forward to avail themselves of the benefits being offered. Chief among these benefits is the option to delay all repayment on principal by one year, for individuals and businesses, but continue the interest payments. Given that Rs4.7tr worth of principal is due over the next year, this is by far the biggest plank in the debt relief plan chalked out by the State Bank and the Pakistan Banks Association. Coupled with the coming reduction in domestic

interest rates that will be reflected in the Karachi Interbank Offered Rate, or Kibor, by the end of March, this could amount to significant relief for local enterprises. There is a high possibility that more will be required in the weeks to come, particularly on the interest rates, but for now the ball has passed to the court of the borrowers, who must now vote on the plan with their actions. If we see a large uptake on the terms being offered, we will know it has been successful. If very few step forward we will know there is a problem.

Banks might need more specific guidance on how to treat those parties who seek to avail the terms being offered. If a request to defer principal payments by one year is treated by the banks as ‘rescheduling’, and thereby adversely impacts a borrower’s credit rating, it will serve as a disincentive to step forward. For the success of the scheme — which must be measured in the number of parties availing its benefits — it is important that those participating in it not be left with an adverse report on their credit rating. Businesses are facing a unique challenge with the lockdowns and certainly have a valid case for getting relief. The extent to which this relief does not become a burden on state finances is important since those funds will be required to underwrite social protection as well as significant investments in healthcare provision. Giving debt relief in the form of deferred repayment of the principal has the benefit of not placing any burden on government finances to provide relief to industry. This is the way forward should further measures be required to support industry, which must not be allowed to become a burden on the state.

Water, water...

WATER is both a blessing and a curse for the coastal communities that live along the Indus delta region. Earlier, a report in this paper gave a glimpse into how sea intrusion in recent decades has changed the centuries-old way of life for the people of Kharo Chan in Sindh. As water consumes entire villages, the families are forced to relocate. In Thatta alone, according to some reports, over 2m acres of land have been lost to an expanding sea. Additionally, when saltwater destroys once fertile farming lands, or mixes with groundwater, entire communities are at risk of suffering from food and water insecurity, disease, and falling below the poverty line. Meanwhile, insufficient freshwater reaching the delta has made it increasingly difficult for residents to access clean drinking water. Much has already been written about the mismanagement and unfair

distribution of water between the provinces, and the damage caused by the construction of dams and barrages along the Indus River, which has resulted in Sindh receiving a trickle of the water supply it is due under the Water Apportionment Accord of 1991. The lack of freshwater flow and increased salinity also poses a grave threat to the Indus delta's once dense mangrove forests. Not only do these forests protect the land from sea intrusion and prevent natural disasters, they also serve as breeding grounds for a diverse range of aquatic wildlife, and the fishing communities are dependent on them.

While March 22 marked World Water Day, the event was largely overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic and the sudden rise in the number of cases around the world. As often said, one of the simplest and most effective ways to counter the spread of the virus is by practising basic hygiene and regularly washing hands with soap. But how will people who do not have access to water do that? This is a good time as any to remember that water and sanitation are human rights, not luxuries.

Front-line warriors

THEY are our first line of defence in the battle against the pandemic; it should not end up becoming their last stand. In a situation aptly described in the language of war, medical personnel are under increasing pressure as Covid-19 cases in Pakistan begin to rise.

One need only look at the near-apocalyptic scenes in the US and several European countries to see what could lie in store: hospitals have been strained to breaking point, and in Spain, nearly 14pc of the total number of coronavirus cases are healthcare workers.

In Pakistan, ill-equipped doctors and nurses dealing with a frightened yet largely misinformed public are doubly at peril. The first Covid-19 fatality among the local medical community — and sadly, there are almost certain to be more — occurred some days ago when a young doctor, Usama Riaz, succumbed to the disease.

He had been working at a screening centre in Gilgit-Baltistan when he was taken ill and rushed to hospital where he breathed his last. It was reported yesterday that at least four doctors and related staff have so far tested positive at two

leading Karachi hospitals. They are among several healthcare workers who have already been stricken with Covid-19 in various parts of the country.

Medical personnel are faced with several challenges in the present situation. For one, they have to deal with a rapidly increasing workload that has seen far better health systems in the West come close to collapse — and we are only at the beginning of a long, gruelling ordeal. Then there is the global shortage of personal protection equipment, vital for medical staff dealing directly with suspected or confirmed Covid-19 patients.

Even though large quantities of PPE and N-95 masks have been recently donated by China and other sources, a steady supply is crucial because they need to be replaced fairly quickly. Ensuring timely delivery also requires proper planning and coordination. Meanwhile, healthcare workers have to make do with whatever protective gear they have available.

The public must also exhibit a far more responsible attitude in their interaction with medical personnel at a time when carelessness or deceit can cost lives. There are accounts of suspected Covid-19 patients deliberately concealing facts such as their travel history, an important consideration to determine the course of action to be taken.

Such an incident, reported in this paper yesterday, took place recently in Multan's Nishtar Hospital and led to a number of on-duty doctors, nurses and paramedics being placed in quarantine after the patient — who subsequently died — tested positive for the disease. This, of course, also illustrates that health protocols must be quickly amended to deal with the situation, not a simple task in the midst of a pandemic. Meanwhile, even as we salute the courage of our front-line warriors, the best we can do for them is to follow the infection prevention guidelines and stay healthy.

Opening supply chains

THE government's decision to lift restrictions on goods transportation will help ease the impact of the coronavirus lockdown on the supply chain of food and other essential items. Suppliers and retailers were already facing a significant surge in demand for nonperishable food items and other necessities as people resorted to panic-buying in cities out of fear of possible shortages. Restrictions

on inter-provincial and intercity movement and the distribution of goods designed to curb the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected over 1,400 people and killed at least 12 in the country, also added to the pressure. Reports from different cities suggested that products such as wheat flour were disappearing from the shops as new supplies were being delayed. However, the centre's timely intervention may have saved the situation. At a press conference after the Friday meeting of the National Coordination Committee regarding the situation in the wake of the lockdown ordered by the provinces, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced another important decision ie opening food-related industries to ensure adequate supplies to meet the spike in demand during the shutdown period.

Indeed, the free movement of goods is essential to avoid supply chain disruptions. But that is not all. Some disruptions are being caused by incompetence and the unwillingness of the bureaucracy to cooperate with producers. For example, the ghee and edible oil industry in Punjab is facing a shortage of vitamins because the railway authorities are refusing to release the consignments imported by the manufacturers. Similarly, the current process for essential and export industries of obtaining notified exemptions from the district administration for their operations is quite cumbersome. It would be much better if the powers to issue those waivers were given to the representative bodies to prevent delays in the domestic and export supply chain. At the same time, the government needs to strictly direct Customs and the port authorities to cut the red tape and help both importers and exporters bring in raw materials or send out shipments. Pakistan, like the rest of the world, is facing a very challenging and uncertain situation. The war against Covid-19 is going to be a long and difficult one. It's time the government took effective measures to simplify its procedures and processes to cut the bureaucratic red tape in order to avert unnecessary disruptions in the domestic supply chain as well as delays in the country's overseas shipments to protect as many jobs as possible.

Polio strikes back

WHILE governments around the world come to terms with a sudden spike in the number of novel coronavirus patients, several new cases of the vaccine-derived poliovirus have been reported in Pakistan, intensifying its current health challenge. As a result, the total number of polio cases in the country has crossed

30 so far this year. This strain of the poliovirus was believed to have been eliminated from the population several years ago, only to make its reappearance last year. After an explosive Guardian investigation revealed flaws in Pakistan's polio eradication programme, the health ministry was forced to admit that there had indeed been a resurgence in the vaccine-derived poliovirus, which has also sprung up in a few other parts of the world in recent years. Pakistan has the unfortunate distinction of being one of only three countries in the world that have not yet been declared polio-free. In 2019, there had been a sudden uptick in the number of polio cases following malicious anti-vaccine campaigns, and higher rates of refusals as a result of them. What is perhaps most tragic is that the country seemed so close to eradicating polio not too long ago, when just eight cases had been reported in 2017 — the lowest it had ever been.

Even though Covid-19 has understandably overshadowed all other news, and much of the country is under lockdown, the campaign to eliminate polio must not be forgotten. Right now, the international community is overwhelmed with the rapid spread of Covid-19, and a cure is yet to be found for it. However, polio has largely been eliminated from the world — even in countries with higher population densities, greater issues with sanitation and longer-lasting conflicts than Pakistan. Medical experts must be brought in to assess how the polio drive can continue under the current climate, and how best to ensure the safety of the health workers and children being administered the vaccine.

IMF rescue package

IT is heartening to hear that the government is in fast-track talks with the International Monetary Fund to accelerate balance-of-payments support for Pakistan as the country gears up for its fight with the coronavirus. The lockdowns that are necessary will exact a terrible toll from industry, and more importantly, from the workforce and the poor, who must be protected, even if extraordinary measures are required. This effort will not only cost money, primarily for ramped-up social protections schemes and investments in healthcare provision, but many of the targets set in the IMF programme are now going to have to be set aside almost entirely. Some examples might be revenues and spending, as well as ceilings on government borrowing. These are extraordinary times and all tools available to the state must be mobilised to build the capacity necessary for success in this fight. There is no alternative to lockdowns to arrest the spread of

the virus, and there is little option but to rapidly boost social protection programmes to enable the vulnerable to weather the resultant freeze in their incomes. The only question right now is how to get all this done.

The IMF has hinted in its statement that its support will be focused on health and social protection, which is the right place for the emphasis to be. But money is fungible, as the Fund is no doubt aware, and external assistance should not mean that the government diverts its own resources, meagre as they may be, towards priorities other than securing access to essential items for the poor and vulnerable and ramping up healthcare. There is a large pull on the state's resources from owners of capital who are speaking about protecting their workers, but in reality are out to protect their own profits. IMF assistance should not provide a cover for resources to be diverted towards this.

For its part, the Fund will need to think about inverting many of the ways in which it has seen the policy framework in Pakistan. Suddenly, it is a good thing that power has been devolved to the provinces since they are today providing the most robust response to the threat. This is a good time to put more resources in the hands of the provinces, perhaps by lowering the provincial surplus targets, to enable them to ramp up their response. And suddenly growth, revenues and debt sustainability are no longer the top priorities for the economic managers. In fact, the Fund now finds itself in the awkward — but essential — position of calling for debt relief for heavily indebted countries like Pakistan so resources can be diverted to the fight against the virus. The quicker the economic managers and their counterparts in the multilateral agencies learn and internalise the new thinking that they now have to demonstrate, the better prepared we will be to wage the fight that has only just begun.

Witch-hunt continues

AT a time when the entire world, including Pakistan, is struggling to cope with the coronavirus epidemic that is playing havoc with the lives of the people, an accountability court has gone ahead and issued non-bailable warrants for former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's arrest. These warrants have been issued in a fresh reference filed by the National Accountability Bureau pertaining to the alleged illegal appointment of the managing director and deputy managing

director of Pakistan State Oil. The judge of the accountability court has ordered NAB to arrest Mr Abbasi and produce him before the court on April 10.

NAB had originally arrested Mr Abbasi in July last year in the case pertaining to setting up an LNG terminal. Later, former finance minister Miftah Ismail was also arrested in the same case, and both spent the rest of the year behind bars. However, NAB failed to produce any evidence that could implicate Mr Abbasi and Mr Ismail in the case and ultimately the court allowed them bail, saying NAB could come up with no justifiable reason to hold them in custody. Since then, the former prime minister has repeatedly said on record that NAB investigators had very little idea of the case they had built against him, and, in fact, the way that NAB officials questioned him a few times in prison bordered on the infantile — so clueless were the investigators about the technicalities of LNG terminals. Mr Ismail has also expressed similar views about the woeful lack of capacity of NAB investigators to understand the complex dynamics of this sector. The court, too, expressed similar sentiments about the dismal performance of NAB and allowed Mr Abbasi and Mr Ismail their freedom. However, it is a matter of deep concern that despite this severe lack of substantive evidence, NAB has gone ahead and filed another reference against the former prime minister and acquired an arrest warrant for him. What reason is there for Mr Abbasi to be incarcerated yet again, after he has already spent so many months in prison without NAB having anything to show for it? If NAB really wants to pursue this case of appointment of two officials, it can always ask Mr Abbasi to present himself for questioning. However, it appears the dragnet around Mr Abbasi is more of a political nature. NAB continues to hack away at its own credibility through such ill-advised actions.

Sri Lanka pardon

THE Sri Lankan civil war, which pitted the Sinhala-majority state against the Tamil LTTE, was a grinding, bloody affair that lasted almost 26 years and resulted in a high number of casualties on both sides. It finally ended in 2009, after then president Mahinda Rajapaksa led a final assault against the Tamil Tigers. The campaign, though successful, was criticised by many in the international community for the excesses committed by the Sri Lankan military against Tamil civilians, though the LTTE was also responsible for massacres of non-combatants during the civil war. It may be over a decade since the war

ended, but the wounds between the ethnic communities have yet to heal. And when the Sri Lankan state is seen as looking the other way when proof of abuse by soldiers emerges, it will do little to bridge the divide. The country's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa — brother of Mahinda Rajapaksa — has recently pardoned an army officer sentenced to death for the slaughter of civilians, including children, in 2000. The Sri Lankan supreme court had upheld the sentence last year.

Though this paper opposes the death penalty in all instances, those involved in such abuses against non-combatants must be punished for their crimes, through life behind bars. By pardoning a soldier found guilty of such a grisly crime, the Sri Lankan state is sending the wrong message; a leading Tamil party in the country has termed the move “opportunistic”. The fact is that ever since the defeat of the LTTE, Sri Lanka has seen a wave of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism where the country's minorities — chiefly Tamils and Muslims — have seen their position on the national stage shrink. Instead of riding the populist wave, the Sri Lankan state should encourage accountability and reconciliation. If minority communities feel left out of the national narrative it will only alienate them and recreate the situation that led to the civil war. The country's leadership needs to promote an atmosphere of national harmony, not exclusivism.

Stranded citizens

AMIDST the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant curbs on international travel, the question of bringing back Pakistanis stranded overseas poses a major dilemma. The government recently announced the suspension of all international flights until April 4 to limit the spread of the virus as authorities ramped up efforts to contain it. The announcement caused panic amongst Pakistani citizens abroad as their return flights were cancelled or indefinitely postponed. Those trying to book flights for after April 4 are confronted with exorbitant ticket prices and the unavailability of seats. Moreover, the government is not sure whether it will resume international flights after that date. All this is causing distress to citizens stuck overseas, and pressure is building on the government to take action.

As Pakistan grapples with Covid-19, one thing is clear: there are no easy choices for the government. Given the havoc it has wreaked in far more developed countries, the government has taken an unpopular yet practical decision to halt

international flights. The reality of authorities' capacity to deal with the huge number of citizens who want to return was evident in the case of the Taftan returnees and poor quarantine facilities. Unless the government can test every returning passenger and make adequate arrangements to hold tens of thousands of citizens near airports, resuming international flights will be a disaster. At present, Pakistan has over 1,700 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and more than 20 fatalities — figures that are accelerating at an alarming rate and crushing the country's inherently fragile healthcare infrastructure. Bringing citizens back from countries in the grip of the pandemic and without effective provisions will have devastating consequences.

In this situation, the government must provide support to stranded citizens through effective communication. Mixed messaging creates confusion and should be avoided. For instance, in response to the plight of citizens, the government briefly granted permission to PIA to operate four special flights to bring passengers back from the UK and Canada, but was forced to withdraw the offer as cases in both countries soared. The CAA's earlier announcement that all returning passengers must provide a Covid-19 certificate, too, was unhelpful and only exacerbated their problems as mass testing is not easily available in many countries. Instead, embassies and consular staff should be directed to provide support to Pakistanis stuck abroad. Helplines must be established which provide steady updates and missions required to troubleshoot the challenges faced by citizens to the best of their ability. They must develop a strategy to manage the cases of those who have fallen ill, run out of funds or are seeking information regarding affordable accommodation. Missions in these countries should also interact with the authorities there to ensure that stranded citizens are provided with emergency visas to help prolong their stay. The message should be conveyed that in these extraordinary circumstances, Pakistani citizens have not been abandoned.

Missile strikes

A BARRAGE of missiles fired by the Yemeni Houthi rebel outfit at Saudi cities over the weekend comes as a stark reminder that the situation in the Arab world's poorest nation remains precarious even as the world battles the coronavirus pandemic. The Houthi projectiles targeted the Saudi capital Riyadh as well as the town of Jizan closer to the Yemeni border. No casualties were

reported though a number of civilians were apparently injured in Riyadh. The strikes came on the fifth anniversary of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen; Riyadh had taken military action in support of Yemen's government against the Iran-backed Houthis. However, the intervention has resulted in the devastation of Saudi Arabia's impoverished southern neighbour, with the Houthis far from defeated. There were reports that jets from the Saudi coalition had bombed the Yemeni capital Sana'a — currently in Houthi control — on Monday in apparent retaliation for the strikes on Saudi cities.

Considering the fact that the whole world, from highly developed states to those with more fragile infrastructure, is battling to keep the Covid-19 pandemic at bay, all parties involved in Yemen must cease fire and devote their efforts to confront the pandemic. In fact, this could be an opportune moment to declare a cessation to hostilities in all trouble spots of the world, including Yemen, as the UN secretary general has also said. The fact is that five years of war have devastated Yemen, and one shudders to think what would happen if a Covid-19 outbreak was reported in the country. As of now, WHO says there are no reported cases in Yemen, but in a state of war it is unclear how much testing is being done. Apart from the man-made disasters that have resulted from the war — death, injuries, malnutrition — Yemen currently suffers from the world's largest cholera epidemic; WHO says 1.3m suspected cases have been recorded. In such a miserable situation, should Covid-19 spread rapidly in the country, the results would be catastrophic. All forces must cease hostilities in Yemen, and the process to bring about a negotiated settlement to the imbroglio must be speeded up. It is essential that Yemen's future is decided by its people, and that all sects and tribes are represented and respected in matters of governance. To prevent the escalation of Yemen's humanitarian nightmare, an end to the ruinous war should be brought about swiftly.

Covid-19 misinformation

AS the fight against Covid-19 rages on across countries, a second crucial battle must be simultaneously fought to end another menacing phenomenon: misinformation.

At a time when fear and panic stemming from the virus are on the rise, the sheer volume of information and 'news' being shared about the infection is reaching

unprecedented heights. Mobile phone and social media users are being constantly bombarded with misinformation, and the vast number of people sharing unverified claims is compounding the issue.

These claims, which eventually circulate as mass forwarded messages on WhatsApp, range from incorrect and misleading information on the origin of the virus to its symptoms and so-called cures. There is a potential danger in falling for these unscientific cures. In Iran, where alcohol is illegal, 44 people died and hundreds were hospitalised after drinking homemade booze as advised by such messages.

In Pakistan, these messages have included harmless home remedies like drinking garlic water but also dangerous advice such as encouraging people to try 'blowing hot air from a hair dryer through your nostrils'. This newspaper recently fact-checked a fake notification that was doing the rounds on social media, claiming that Pakistan's health ministry had suggested that a prevention method was to keep one's throat moist.

WHO has rightly declared this as an 'infodemic' — an excessive amount of information which makes the solution to a problem more difficult. Citizens must address their fears and queries by using legitimate sources of information. For global updates, the most reliable source of information is WHO. In Pakistan, people looking for accurate information must turn to the government and trusted news sources — while also being wary of 'fake news' ie photoshopped images which falsely purport to belong to an organisation.

In this crisis, it is the responsibility of citizens to exercise caution and be more discerning about the information they pass on. If the 'news' is not available on official channels and if one is not sure about its veracity or source, it is not worth sharing.