



DAWN

EDITORIALS

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Compiled By
Shahbaz Shakeel
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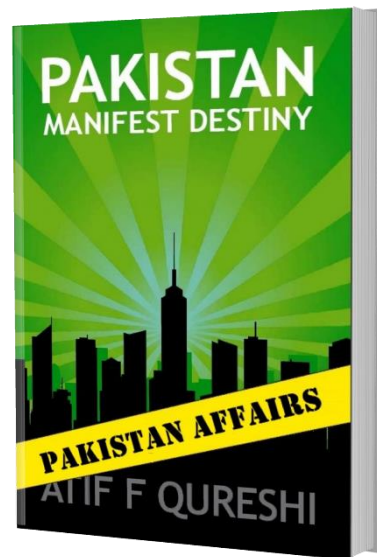
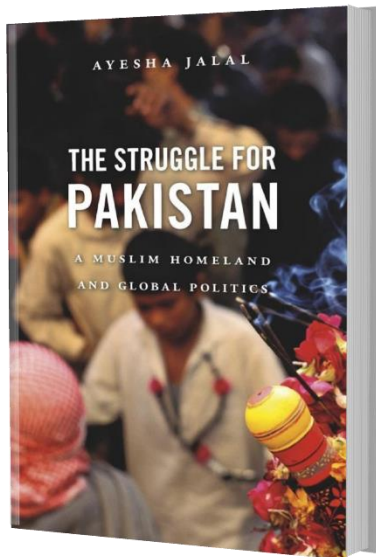
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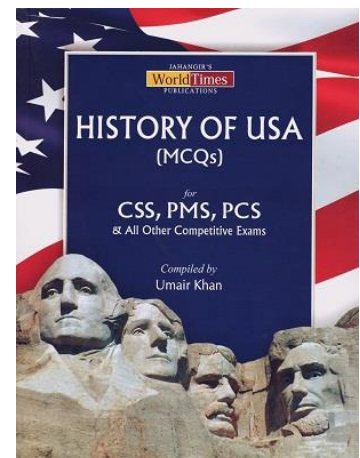
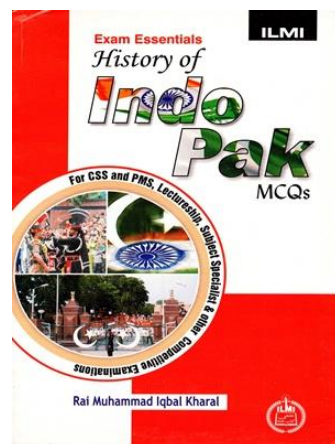
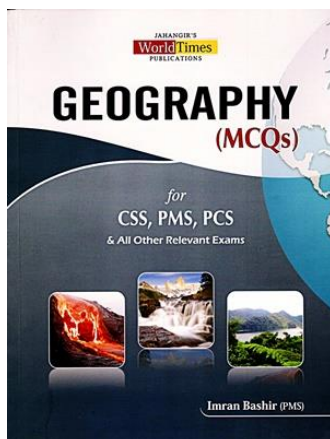
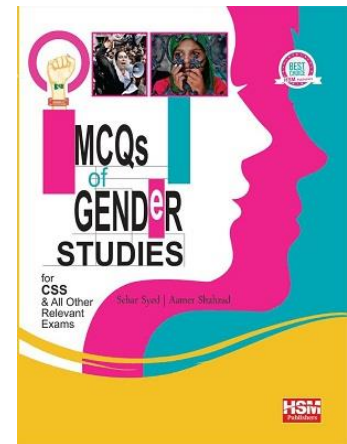
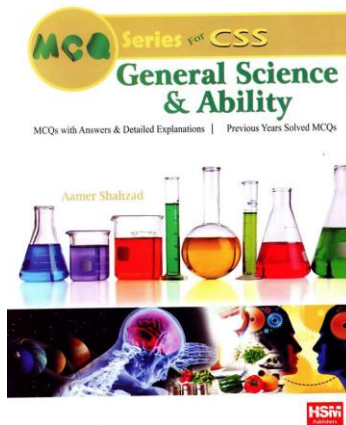
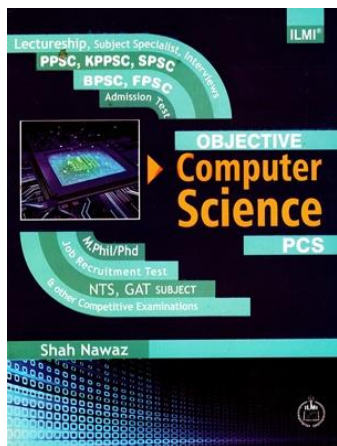
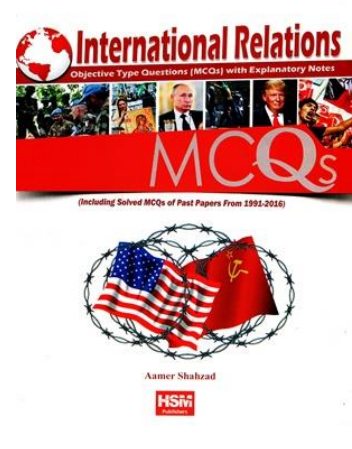
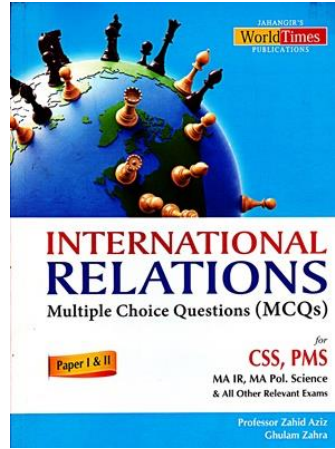
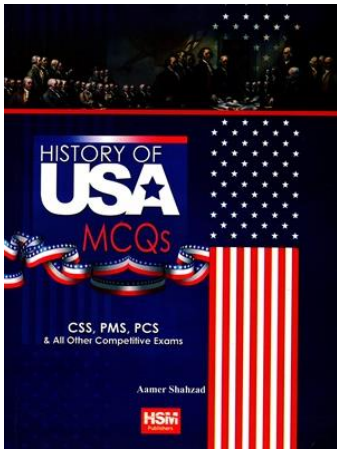


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Partial relief for Afghanistan

IN a major development, the United States has issued new rules allowing commercial and financial transactions with Afghanistan that could give much-needed relief to the faltering economy. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced these measures and said these new rules would ease the flow of humanitarian aid and commercial activities. “To be clear, sanctions on the Taliban remain in place,” he, however, added. This means financial institutions, NGOs and private-sector companies can now have transactions with Afghanistan as long as they comply with the sanctions. These new rules will inject greater liquidity into Afghanistan’s economy and facilitate the flow of funds into the country through official channels. The announcement is a welcome one because it comes at a time of increasing economic hardship in Afghanistan. The United Nations and other agencies had been warning of a looming humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan in the absence of a formal way of getting financial aid to the people. It is expected that these new rules will have a favourable impact on the Afghan economy in the coming weeks and months.

Pakistan has been at the forefront of efforts to enable greater international help for Afghanistan. A special meeting of the OIC foreign ministers was held in Islamabad recently on Afghanistan and it helped highlight the need for urgent steps needed to bring relief to the people of that country. Prime Minister Imran Khan has also been raising these concerns during all his international visits by reminding the world that Afghanistan needs greater assistance and not more isolation. It is therefore encouraging to see the US, that has been rightly criticised for withholding a large portion of Afghan central bank assets, taking some steps towards easing the suffering of the people of Afghanistan.

However, as long as sanctions remain in place, Afghanistan’s economy will continue to gasp for breath. The global community has to realise that the Taliban government is now a reality that cannot be wished away. It is better to engage with it and slowly bring it back to the mainstream instead of trying to weaken it through sanctions. The situation in Afghanistan has not turned out to be what the US and its allies would have preferred, but this does not mean that the people of

Afghanistan should face the brunt of international ire. They have already suffered enough through decades of conflict and deserve to return to a semblance of normalcy. The issue of recognising the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan should therefore be brought back to the table without any delay. The Taliban can facilitate this by letting go of their obduracy and fulfilling the genuine requirements of the international community. They must show through their actions that they are protecting and promoting the rights of women and minorities and taking steps that prove that they are ready to join the global mainstream.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2022

New dawn for cricket

HAVING led the Lahore Qalandars to their maiden Pakistan Super League title, Shaheen Shah Afridi — like his other Pakistan teammates — faces a quick turnaround from the razzmatazz of the country's premier T20 tournament to the hard grind of international Test cricket.

After all, the speculation over whether or not they would come, and much deliberation, Australia have arrived for their first tour of Pakistan in 24 years. On a 'Super Sunday' for Pakistan cricket, Australia landed in Islamabad early in the morning before the climax of the first PSL season played in its entirety in the country just before midnight in Lahore. It was already Monday by the time Shaheen lifted the trophy as the Qalandars finally tasted glory after disappointments and a final heartbreak — in 2020 — in the previous six seasons. This, incredibly, was Shaheen's first season as Qalandars' captain.

The 21-year-old reigning ICC Cricketer of the Year represents the future of Pakistan cricket, having established himself as the national team's pace bowling spearhead. He, alongside Pakistan's latest crop of globally recognised stars including skipper Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan — who was leading runners-up Multan Sultans in Sunday's PSL final — will now look to inspire the national team in the three-Test series against Australia starting this week in Rawalpindi before matches in Karachi and Lahore. Three One-Day Internationals and a Twenty20 game will follow where the trio will be joined by Islamabad United captain Shadab Khan.

PSL has moulded these young players into leaders, enhancing the leadership trait in the team. That was evident in Pakistan's strong performances at the end of last year, including their run to the semi-finals of the Twenty20 World Cup where they lost to eventual champions Australia.

There is also a sense of perfect timing with the way these stars have emerged; it coincided with the full-fledged return of international cricket to the country starting with Australia's first tour since 1998 — a bygone era in many ways. The last time they toured, Shaheen wasn't even born. Babar had just turned four while Rizwan was six.

In a press conference after Australia's arrival, its Test captain Pat Cummins was quick to point out that an entire generation of cricketers from Down Under had missed the chance to play in Pakistan. But with international cricket returning quickly to the country, with New Zealand and England due to tour later this year, strong performances will certainly help Pakistan make up for lost time.

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Energy challenge

WITH global gas prices soaring to new highs in the aftermath of the ongoing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Pakistan's energy chaos is going to aggravate. The government is left with no choice but to either buy expensive LNG — if and when available — in order to meet the fuel requirements of the country's power sector and industry, or reduce spot gas imports to protect its meagre foreign exchange reserves. The sole mitigating factor is the supply of seven cargoes a month by Qatar — currently at almost a third of the spot LNG price — under two long-term contracts with Islamabad against the nation's total requirement of 12 to 14 cargoes. At present, the spot purchases of a cargo cost nearly \$80m against the \$26m to \$30m that Pakistan pays for a cargo under its contracts with Qatar. Even international traders Gunvor and ENI, with whom the government has contracts for the supply of one LNG cargo every month, have been defaulting on their commitments ever since global LNG prices started to surge at the onset of the cold season.

With world gas prices forecast to stay elevated in the coming months — prices in Europe for summer delivery have already soared from \$24/mmbtu to \$40/mmbtu

— it is time that policymakers started thinking hard about the country's energy security. Whatever is going on in the international market isn't in the control of the government. Yet it must give a thought to formulating a short- to long-term energy policy that takes into account changing market fundamentals in the wake of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. In the short term, it appears, we will need to temporarily replace LNG with furnace oil and diesel until gas prices cool down. But longer-term energy security demands that the government come up with a strategy to attract investments in domestic oil and the gas exploration industry for new discoveries as well as encourage the use of renewable energy to cut reliance on costly fuel imports.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2022

Scrambling for support?

THE 'relief' in energy prices announced by a beleaguered Prime Minister Imran Khan on Monday is simply a populist move to divert the public anger against his government towards his political opponents, and to also improve his party's electoral chances in 2023 — or sooner. That is not all.

His government has announced yet another tax amnesty to allow those who had not availed a similar scheme for housing and construction previously to launder their illegitimate wealth by investing it in industry. Obviously, the prime minister is scrambling to win over different segments of society, with the combined opposition turning up the heat through protest rallies and by reaching out to his allies and dissenting PTI lawmakers for a planned vote of no-confidence against him.

It is hard to say at the moment whether the government will survive a vote of no-confidence, or indeed, if the opposition actually has the numbers to succeed in its strategy against him. But notwithstanding the outcome of the exercise, if and when it happens, it is clear that the opposition's cumulative efforts in this direction over the last one month have disturbed the ruling party.

The reduction in motor fuel and electricity prices, and the cap on their new rates for the next four months through June, will cost the exchequer Rs130bn. A sum of Rs93bn is earmarked to cushion an upward movement in world oil prices or deterioration in the exchange rate. The latest 'relief package' will be financed

from the unspent cash allocated for the Ehsaas programme and the money given by the IMF for combating the Covid-19 pandemic, cuts in development funds, dividend income from state-owned energy companies and taxes.

According to Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin, who had been until recently hinting at a further increase in domestic energy prices as the ‘government was unable to keep fuel prices artificially low’, the IMF was on board on the relief package since it will not affect the fiscal deficit target for the year agreed with it. That may be so. But the announcement made out of political compulsions underlines the ad hoc and chaotic approach of the ruling party towards Pakistan’s economic policy.

Over the last three-and-half years, we have seen the government dilly-dallying before accepting the IMF’s harsh funding programme in 2019 to tackle the currency crisis, ditching the lender midway last year to pursue growth and again returning to it later. In the meantime, Mr Khan repeatedly changed the core finance team as he struggled to set a direction for the nation’s economy. That said, the question is: will his latest volte-face on energy prices help the government control the soaring prices, recoup its lost popularity with inflation-stricken low- and middle-income households and fight off the pressure brought by the combined opposition? We should know soon enough.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2022

Ukraine dilemma

AS the Ukraine conflict drags on, with no immediate solution to the crisis on the horizon, members of the international community — including Pakistan — are being confronted with the dilemma of how to react to the events. Members of the Western bloc have responded to the Russian invasion with schemes to isolate Moscow from the international order, while other states are treading more cautiously. In such a situation, Pakistan has to consider its relations with the US and EU, as well as not jeopardising ties with Russia. However, without joining any blocs, it is clear that Pakistan has a responsibility to condemn the invasion of a sovereign country, along with calling for a cessation of hostilities. As it stands, this country has chosen not to participate in the UN General Assembly’s emergency session called to discuss the Ukraine crisis. While a Pakistani diplomat told this paper that this country “will not take sides”, the majority of the states that participated in the discussion in the UNGA session called for an end

to the war, with Secretary General António Guterres terming the “escalating violence ... totally unacceptable”. Even China and India, which had abstained during an earlier UNSC vote to censure Russia, participated in the UNGA discussion.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has mentioned the Ukraine crisis during his address to the nation on Monday night. He said that Pakistan intended to import Russian wheat and gas, thus implying that this country should not get on Moscow’s wrong side. While maintaining and balancing relations — political, strategic and economic — with global players is an integral part of any country’s foreign policy, moral imperatives cannot be forgotten. Russia’s justifications for its invasion of Ukraine hardly stand up to scrutiny and despite Nato’s sabre-rattling in this case, the violation of Kyiv’s sovereignty cannot be condoned. Pakistan should state this without ambiguity, while continuing to call for an end to hostilities and a negotiated settlement to the crisis. The pressure in the days to come will mount, especially if the crisis drags on. Representatives of foreign missions in Pakistan, mostly belonging to the Western camp, have called on this country to condemn the Russian invasion in a joint letter. Pakistan will have to carefully and intelligently navigate the choppy waters ahead by condemning the aggression, while at the same time refusing to be drawn into bloc politics as geopolitical changes occur with incredible swiftness.

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Unliveable future

THE United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has released a report — its second in eight months — to once again underscore what is becoming distressingly obvious: humankind has failed to secure a “liveable future” for itself. Without mincing words, the report warns that we may have run out of time to arrest global warming and that even if ongoing efforts succeed, there is no escaping a “horrifying atlas of human suffering” with “worse to come”. In a similar report last August, the IPCC had sounded “code red for humanity”, stating that global warming was “dangerously close to being out of control” and that the residents of this planet were “unequivocally” to blame for it. While the earlier report had warned global leaders to step up efforts to arrest global

warming and slow down irreversible damage to the earth, the latest one appears to have sounded the planet's death knell by predicting that the collapse of ecosystems, outbreak of disease, deadly heatwaves, extinction of species, drought and dangerous wildfires and storms will continue even if environmental pollution is reduced quickly.

According to one of the authors of the report, "No one is left unaffected by climate change. Overall, the picture is stark for food systems". In fact, regions where climate change events combine with other concurrent stresses, such as those associated with bad governance and hardship, will be affected far more. Some of the worst affected regions will include Africa, Asia, South and Central America. For South Asia in particular, there is considerable evidence that the tipping point for substantial changes in the water cycle might be very close. This would translate into prolonged droughts, heavier rains and greater flood hazards, in addition to the increased threat of glacial lake outbursts. For the fifth most populous country in the world, and one which is already among the 10 nations most vulnerable to climate change, the report spells ecological and socioeconomic doom. We have taken few steps to mitigate the effects of climate change, and our future is bleak.

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Industrialisation goals

THE package of tax incentives announced by the prime minister to push industrialisation in the country trumps past efforts to support private capital investment in the manufacturing businesses. It aims to bolster investments in new companies, revive closed factories and help existing industrial units expand their production capacities and upgrade their technology. The incentives will be applicable on capital investments of Rs50m and above in small to large industrial units. All local, foreign and overseas Pakistani investors are eligible to benefit from the tax cuts and exemptions if they start production before the end of FY24. But what is troubling is that, much in the manner of earlier amnesty schemes, no questions will be asked about the source of funds invested in industrial projects, enabling some investors to whitewash illicit money and complicating efforts to document the economy. Resident and non-resident Pakistanis willing to bring back their foreign disclosed and undisclosed assets to the country will get some

additional tax benefits. The controversial amnesty scheme notwithstanding, businessmen seem upbeat about the potential of the new strategy to industrialise the country for boosting exports and creating new jobs. Many expect the tax relief to lead to substantial fresh local and foreign capital investment in the months ahead.

While announcing the incentive package in Lahore a day after slashing energy prices, the prime minister rightly pointed out that no country could advance economically, generate jobs and alleviate poverty without boosting and diversifying industrial productivity. Narrow and inadequate industrialisation is one of the major reasons for Pakistan's low exports and, consequently, the repeated currency crises that the economy has endured over the last several decades after brief periods of 'economic boom'. Little wonder Pakistan has sought 12 bailout packages from the IMF in the last three decades to cope with its recurring balance-of-payment difficulties. Tax incentives, especially for those with documented funds, are important to attract investors. But these alone will not do the trick. The government should also undertake legal, regulatory and energy reforms, and cut the bureaucratic red tape to make manufacturers and exporters competitive in international markets. Pakistan has grown its overseas sales in the last couple of years but its dependence on low-value-added textiles and lack of market diversification means that its imports have far outpaced its exports. The journey to diversified industrialisation can be tough and long, and requires consistency in policies and perseverance. Piecemeal measures can do only so much.

Published in Dawn, March 3rd, 2022

Indefensible stance

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's defence of the amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, is untenable. Truth be told, it is based on the kind of disinformation that the government itself claims justifies the need for such draconian amendments to the law. Mr Khan, in his address to the nation on Monday, said that his government had promulgated the ordinance to tackle the "filth of child pornography and harassment of women" on social media. "More than 94,000 cases regarding women's harassment, fake news and pictures are pending with the FIA and of those, only 38 cases have been disposed of so far,"

he observed. In that case, the government should have pulled up the FIA for its inaction, which civil society activists have brought on the record multiple times to no avail. After all, a few days before the ordinance was passed, the law-enforcement agency wasted no time in arresting media personality Mohsin Baig following a complaint filed against him under Peca by a federal minister, so why does it drag its feet on processing other cases?

The intention behind amending Peca has nothing to do with the protection of any segment of the populace: it is purely self-interest and self-preservation. In fact, the PTI government's own functionaries and the party's official social media accounts initiate and enable trolling of the most vile sort against independent-minded women journalists. Resistance to this unconstitutional ordinance is snowballing, with several journalist organisations and bar councils having filed petitions against it. While hearing one of these petitions, the chief justice of the Islamabad High Court rightly pointed out that improvement to the already existing defamation law was all that was needed to ensure swift disposal of cases. Criminalising defamation is not the answer, at least in a country not ruled by a tinpot dictator.

However, the PTI government has long used the red herring of 'fake news' to discredit responsible journalism that did not gel with its narrative. By bringing in legislation which so comprehensively seeks to gag the media and silence critical voices, its hollow claims about respecting the right to freedom of speech stand exposed — as do whatever remains of its democratic credentials. Consider the timing of the ordinance: it was passed on a Sunday, Feb 20, only two days after the government in an unprecedented move cancelled a scheduled session of the National Assembly. In a functioning democracy, a bill would have been introduced and debated by elected members of parliament before being voted on. Certainly, as the prime minister said in his speech, it was the PML-N government that enacted Peca — something that should forever remain a stain on that party's record. But for Mr Khan to say that his own government was "only amending it", is being economical with the truth. The amendments have made a black law far worse.

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Blatant injustice

NAB HAS often been criticised — and rightly so — for hounding opponents of the government of the day and bringing them to heel rather than delivering any accountability worth the name. The tragic case of retired Brig Asad Munir highlights the flaws in NAB's system of accountability, and how this institution is often used to target innocent individuals.

As reported, Asad Munir, who committed suicide in 2019 after NAB had booked him in a corruption case, has been acquitted of the charges against him. The accountability court judge ruled that the case was not fit for trial. It is simply a travesty of justice that an innocent man was hounded to the point where he took his own life due to the persecution and humiliation he faced at the hands of the investigating agencies. While constantly proclaiming his innocence, he had been paraded in handcuffs and subjected to a media trial, which proved too much to bear.

This case is not the only one of its kind. Another civil servant, Khurram Humayun, also reportedly took his own life after facing questionable corruption charges. These tragedies illustrate the dire need to change the method of investigating corruption cases in Pakistan. Whether it is politicians, civil servants or ordinary citizens, no one can be presumed guilty before being proven so in a court of law.

Meanwhile, media trials and character assassination campaigns can have a devastating effect on law-abiding citizens accused of financial impropriety. NAB must not be used as a tool to target opposition figures or bureaucrats who refuse to toe the line. The state cannot compensate Asad Munir's family for the gross miscarriage of justice. But it can take steps to ensure that no more innocent people's lives are destroyed due to dubious corruption allegations. By all means the state needs to punish the corrupt, but fighting graft and hunting down political opponents are two very different matters. An urgent and thorough overhaul of NAB is, therefore, the need of the hour.

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Another attack in Quetta

THE continuing spate of deadly attacks in Balochistan lays bare the state's failure to pre-empt subversive forces, which seem to be operating with untempered vigour. Violence once again visited the provincial capital on

Wednesday, with a remote-controlled bomb killing at least three and injuring 25 on Quetta's Fatima Jinnah Road. It appeared from initial reports that the attack was planned and aimed at inflicting casualties on a police patrol. While a station house officer, whose vehicle appeared to have been targeted, survived, a deputy superintendent was not as fortunate. Civilian lives and property, too, were lost or damaged. They bore the worst of the attack, as they invariably do in incidents such as these. While there has been no claim of responsibility thus far, it bears mentioning that this was the second attack in Quetta within a week targeting the city police force. The first, a gun attack last Friday on policemen taking a lunch break, was claimed by the banned TTP. The modus operandi of both incidents suggests that the attackers had knowledge of police movements and response strategies and targeted them when they were at their most vulnerable.

Front-line security personnel cannot be allowed to become sitting ducks for anti-state elements. It is clear that there is a need to step up counter-intelligence efforts so that the elements providing support to violent outfits can be identified and isolated. It is also inexplicable why, given the visible resurgence of violence in Balochistan since the start of this year, civil security forces are not exercising increased caution and vigilance. This is surely not a time to be complacent. Valuable lives are being lost as authorities fail to proactively respond to the challenge of dealing with enemies that are evolving their tactics and refusing to back down. The National Security Policy unveiled just weeks ago promised a more secure Pakistan for all its citizens. Decisive actions must be taken — and seen to be taken — for people to keep their faith in that promise.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2022

Underage marriage

TRADITION can sometimes be an albatross around one's neck. In a conservative, patriarchal society like Pakistan where a high premium is placed on a woman's childbearing role, early marriage is often seen as a desirable 'aspiration' for females. However, the Islamabad High Court on Tuesday delivered an eminently wise judgement in a case of early marriage that implicitly recognises the practice as the root cause of many social ills and much personal tragedy. Issuing a written order on the plea of a woman seeking recovery of her 16-year-old daughter who had filed an affidavit to say she had tied the knot of her

own free will, Justice Babar Sattar declared the marriage of anyone under 18 years of age as being unlawful. "...[G]uided by principles of Islamic jurisprudence and Principles of Policy enshrined in the Constitution, (including state's obligation to protect the woman, the child and the family), the test for legal agency and competence of a female child is her biological age and not her state of physical and biological growth," he wrote. The ruling rightly noted that a child cannot be "deemed to have the competence or capacity" to parent a child of his/her own while being a minor.

Indeed, an early marriage means a childhood lost. It has profound and long-term consequences for girls' education and health and for the quality of life they can provide to their own progeny. The onerous responsibilities of a marital relationship and subsequent parenthood leave minors more vulnerable to domestic violence, to death in childbirth, and to medical conditions like obstetric fistula and cervical cancer. The latter is the third most frequent cancer among women overall in Pakistan, but the second most frequent among females between 15 and 44 years. While the IHC judgement is only applicable to the ICT, provincial legislators should take a cue from it to amend their own laws. Sindh has already done the needful when in 2014, it criminalised child marriage and raised the minimum marriageable age for females from 16 to 18 years, bringing it on par with that for males. The other provinces however are still frozen in time, having retained 16 years as the minimum age at which girls can marry. That is not to say that child marriage does not happen in Sindh — some reports suggest the incidence is rising — but the law at least provides the framework on which to act against the misogynistic practice.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2022

No-confidence tension

UI-F CHIEF Maulana Fazlur Rehman has claimed that the next 48 hours are important and that a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan is on the verge of being tabled. Other opposition leaders are claiming that they have the numbers needed to de-seat the prime minister and bring about a constitutional regime change.

These leaders are also hinting that the motion for no-confidence will be filed in the National Assembly very shortly. The government continues to put up a brave

face saying its majority is intact because the allies are holding firm. The coming week is expected to be a very crucial one.

An important factor in this evolving situation is the prospects of PTI members breaking rank and voting against their leader. For the government, this is an unthinkable outcome but the opposition continues to say that a fair number of PTI legislators are ready to cross over in return for some guarantees that includes the award of PML-N tickets for the next general elections. If these PTI MNAs do jump ship, they could tilt the vote in favour of the opposition.

However, they would also then trigger the disqualification clause because of floor crossing. This eventuality has been a topic of discussion for many weeks and the optimists within the opposition maintain that they have been able to provide some answers to these legislators. One argument they are peddling is that the process of disqualification can be a long-drawn-out affair. The speaker of the National Assembly has to issue a notice and that process — which entails plenty of correspondence back and forth — then moves to the Election Commission. There too the process could drag on.

In the same vein, opposition leaders are also hinting that they might file a no-confidence motion against National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaisar. If they manage to succeed and replace him with someone from their ranks, then the disqualification process can become even lengthier. These arguments are being given to incentivise PTI members to jump ship. The scorecard however remains uncertain at this point.

What is also uncertain is the scenario if the no-confidence vote succeeds. The PML-N leadership has been insistent that fresh elections should be called as soon as possible. The PPP on the other hand favours the new government continuing till the scheduled elections late next year. There is no clarity whether the two sides have been able to narrow their differences and agreed to a final decision.

This also means that those being asked to cross sides — allies as well as PTI members — remain uncertain of what they would gain were they to switch sides. The PML-Q would ideally want the chief ministership of Punjab for Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi but that would mean little if fresh elections are called within a few months. The situation remains tense.

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Return of carnage

A PALL of gloom hangs heavy on Pakistan. Peshawar's fragile peace — which was at times tested, but had largely endured for the past few years — was rent asunder yesterday by the indiscriminate slaughter of Shia worshippers gathered for weekly Friday prayers.

As the faithful packed the halls of a mosque in the provincial capital's Kocha Risaldar area for the congregation, at least one attacker shot his way inside the place of worship before detonating a vest rigged with explosives. At the time this paper went to print, hospital sources had confirmed 57 dead and more than 190 injured.

Condemnations were swift and incident reports hurriedly sought by both the interior minister and the premier. The information minister pointed to a 'larger conspiracy', while the interior minister saw the hand of elements wanting to destabilise the country and reignite sectarian tensions. Despite what those in power have said or will say, the attack betrayed the national security apparatus's unpreparedness for what now seems to be a gradually expanding spectrum of terrorist activities.

A string of recent deadly attacks in neighbouring Afghanistan should have prompted at least some concern in national security circles regarding the welfare and protection of minorities, who frequently find themselves on the receiving end of the bestial violence unleashed by terrorist outfits.

This latest attack, though as yet unclaimed, has all the hallmarks of similar attacks in Kandahar and Kunduz in Afghanistan this past October. Both were claimed by the militant Islamic State's Khorasan chapter, which revels in a virulently anti-Shia ideology. It had earlier been feared that the IS-K's bloody successes in Afghanistan would inspire similar attempts by sectarian outfits on this side of the border.

There were also other signs of terrorist outfits' increased focus on minorities residing in Peshawar. In September, a Sikh herbalist who had run a clinic for 20 years in the city was murdered, branded a polytheist by IS-K operatives. In January, a Christian priest returning home from Sunday service was gunned

down in similar circumstances, and security sources believe IS-K to have been involved.

The two events should have alerted authorities to the heightened danger being faced by minority communities. Instead, as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's spokesperson suggested, the security provided for protection of worshippers who frequented the Kocha Risaldar mosque had only been provided as a 'general rule'. This suggests that there had been no serious escalation in threat perception despite the multiple red flags.

Yesterday's attack, grave tragedy that it is, also represents a significant setback for those who have been working to change how Pakistan is perceived internationally. There needs to be a rethink of national security policy regarding outfits that target communities for their beliefs, as well as those that enable and encourage them to further their hateful agendas in the name of some misguided ideology.

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Housing costs

THE reality of escalating prices seems to have finally struck the government as contractors suspend work on all low-cost, public-sector housing schemes owing to project cost overruns on the back of a spike in construction material rates. A senior federal housing ministry official has informed the Public Accounts Committee that the contractors have stopped work on every housing project being funded by the PTI government through the Federal Government Employees Housing Authority and the Pakistan Housing Authority Foundation in Lahore, Islamabad and Rawalpindi since August last year until project costs are revised upwards to compensate them for the phenomenal surge in construction material prices, especially steel and cement. So far the housing ministry is refusing to accept the demand as the escalated charges are much higher than the benchmark set by the PAC and Public Procurement Regulatory Authority rules in such events. The matter has now been referred to the Planning Commission to suggest a way to pay the cost escalation difference to the contractors so that they can resume work on the projects. The longer it takes to find a way out, the higher the cost overruns will be.

The delay in the completion of these projects will indeed deal a blow to the prime minister's plan to provide low-cost housing to government employees and low-middle-income families. But it is difficult to find fault with the contractors in this case. The cost of construction material — particularly steel — has soared sharply over the last several months due to both a global commodity price surge, and the rise in domestic demand with the housing and construction boom in the country. No one could have factored in such a large jump in project costs over such a short period of time. The housing ministry official's testimony before the PAC also brings to the fore a serious issue in the government's outdated procurement rules: the lack of a mechanism to compensate contractors and service providers in such contingencies so that project delays and attendant cost overruns can be avoided. That the cumbersome PPRA rules have become a major impediment to quicker and cheaper procurement of goods and services by the government is known to all. Yet no government has changed them for fear of criticism by political opponents. It is time that the rules governing the procurement of goods and services by the public sector are updated to align them with new market realities.

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Reviving student unions

INDEED, the enactment of the Sindh Students' Union Restoration Act has been rightly hailed as a milestone achieved by the PPP-led provincial government and other political stakeholders. The revival of student unions after nearly four decades is a crucial step towards the democratisation of universities in the province, turning them into a hub of ideological and political grounding of youth. However, the law, besides giving students mandatory representation in the university's administrative bodies and anti-harassment committees, gives carte blanche to higher educational institutions to come up with the modalities of electing student unions. It remains to be seen how they respond to this shift in campus administration and environment.

Notwithstanding the rules and regulations decided by universities for electing their respective student representative bodies, the process would no doubt enable the democratisation of the varsity's decision-making process. In the absence of any legitimate student representation, a number of students'

concerns eg change in fee structure and provision of facilities in hostels could not be brought up effectively before university administrations and hence remained unresolved. Understandably, the election of student unions on campuses will aid varsity administrations to better govern campuses and resolve students' long-standing issues. Moreover, student-led activities would pave the way for increased debate and interaction on campuses where the intellectual environment has been paralysed on account of curbs on free expression and the polarisation of politics. Under these circumstances, varsity administrations will have to evolve so that they can include students' perspectives in their attempt to maintain a healthy academic environment without ceding to pressure from political quarters whose perverse influence has grown over the years. For their part, political parties should demonstrate their sincerity in developing a grassroots leadership and pledge to rein in their student wings that have operated on campuses with disturbing impunity for decades — that is, they should stop waging their turf wars on university campuses. Political parties in other provinces should follow suit and strive to create an enabling environment for the revival of student unions.

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Hollow words

MQM-P CONVENER Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui's mealy-mouthed 'apology' over the MQM's role in precipitating the May 12, 2007, riots in Karachi is cold comfort for those whose lives were forever scarred by that terrible tragedy. As Mr Siddiqui referred to the horrors unleashed upon unsuspecting citizens that fateful day, he failed to show any real remorse. Instead, he attempted to whitewash the party's actions as a 'misjudgment'. Rather than accepting the MQM's culpability, he shifted the blame on nameless individuals for having 'used' the party. This is hardly out of character. The MQM (and its later iterations) have been quite creative in dodging accountability for their misdeeds, often by painting themselves as victims. Incidentally, this is exactly what Mr Siddiqui proceeded to do at the same event, defending his party as "a product of marginalisation and violence".

The fact of the matter is that the MQM has much more than just May 12, 2007, to apologise for. MQM leaders were once exemplary for their willingness to be

'used' by their leader for whatever ends he needed them. Hit squads and criminal enterprises operated by party members terrorised the city, often with the explicit blessings of party supremo Altaf Hussain. Thousands were killed, maimed or tortured, often for no conceivable reason, after the party put down roots in Karachi. The party quite consistently also seemed to find ways to be 'used' by successive regimes — military or otherwise. It almost never found itself too far from the perks, privileges and attendant luxuries of power. It wasn't until 2016, when the state finally had enough, that the MQM's local leadership was forced, against its will, to part ways from its London command. To say this is perhaps a little cynical, but moments of clarity such as the one the MQM-P convener seems to have had are usually just poorly disguised attempts at grabbing the spotlight because political expediency so demands. If the MQM-P is genuinely remorseful, it owes the people of Karachi a lot more than hollow words.

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Brutal police tactics

ISLAMABAD High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah has written in an order that suppressing voices of dissent or discouraging raising of grievances against the state amounted to sedition. These emphatic words are contained in the order issued after the hearing of a petition on a case regarding police action against protesting students in Islamabad. The students had gathered in Islamabad recently against the alleged enforced disappearance of their fellow student Hafeez Baloch. The police used violence against these peaceful protesters and also registered criminal cases against them. The IHC chief justice has done the right thing by chastising the local police and administration officials and reminding them that their constitutional duty is to protect the rights of citizens. Unfortunately, such harsh ways of dealing with citizens has become the norm for the police and administration officials. This attitude is a hangover from the colonial times that the bureaucracy refuses to discard despite knowing that the relationship between the state and the citizen has changed since those times. Such abhorrent behaviour becomes all the more troublesome when it is employed against people who are already nursing grievances against the state. These students from Balochistan were raising genuine questions about enforced disappearances that have become a festering wound in the province. Instead of unleashing violence on them, the police and administration should have taken

extra care to address their concerns to the best of their abilities. By using force, they have reinforced the perception that the state willingly persecutes those considered weaker.

The IHC chief justice must be commended for admonishing these state functionaries and providing justice to the victims of police brutality. However, such incidents will continue unless there is a genuine change in how the state treats its own citizens. Reforming the bureaucracy is a goal that remains unfulfilled despite claims by all governments, including the present one. Police reform is also an issue that has quietly been buried. The result is a continuation of a culture that perpetuates the role of the state as a predator and not a protector. The courts are doing well to balance this state high-handedness by enforcing the rights of citizens. This in itself acts as a deterrent and ensures that the state is held to account for such excesses. A long-term solution is however required if we want the state to shed its mediaeval approach and transition into a modern one.

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Ukraine conundrum

AS international condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine rises to a crescendo, Islamabad may find it prudent to recalibrate its position.

Pakistan had briefly sleepwalked into the eye of the storm by virtue of Prime Minister Imran Khan's unfortunately timed visit to Moscow. Though that visit was aimed solely at building trade and economic ties, as was later made clear, it had been expected that the foreign minister would subsequently lead a robust diplomatic effort to elucidate Pakistan's stance on the Ukraine crisis.

Instead, Western capitals seem to have grown increasingly agitated at what is being seen as Pakistan's abdication of its diplomatic responsibilities, with Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi apparently giving most of his attention to political rallies in rural Sindh. Mr Qureshi was missing from the federal capital when more than 20 heads of foreign missions in Islamabad broke with convention to call on Pakistan, through a press release, to join them in voicing support for Ukraine in the UN General Assembly emergency session this past week. Among the signatories to that appeal were some of our oldest, closest and

most important economic partners — countries that have substantially invested in and assisted Pakistan in charting a course for the prosperity of its people. Yet, Islamabad remained unrelenting.

It is true that some find the hypocrisy of Western powers' insistence that Pakistan condemn Russia for the invasion of Ukraine galling. The fabrications and flimsy excuses used to legitimise the invasion of Iraq are still fresh in many minds. It is also not unreasonable to empathise with Russia on its valid national security concerns, especially with respect to the expansion of Nato on its western flank.

However, these factors should not prevent Pakistan from taking a clear, principled stand in line with international laws. Pakistan has a moral responsibility to condemn the invasion of a sovereign state, as well as the loss of life and humanitarian suffering it has wrought. So far, Islamabad's near absence from the global stage in the midst of a global crisis has been jarring. A nuclear power representing more than 200m people should not excuse itself from participating while an issue of such world-shaking import plays out.

While it may be that Pakistan is finally at the cusp of a new era of improved ties with Russia, the country cannot be seen to be turning a blind eye to the latter's violation of international law. It is morally imperative for Pakistan to unequivocally call for a cessation of hostilities, the immediate withdrawal of troops and a negotiated end to the conflict. Islamabad should also express in clear terms that it stands by the people of Ukraine in a war they did not provoke. Islamabad will not be afforded the luxury of watching from the sidelines for long — not when time-tested economic partners have come calling for support.

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Forgotten Afghans

WHEN the US withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, there was evidently little optimism that Washington and its European allies would have any appetite left for continuing to support the impoverished country, especially as it had been taken over by an enemy they had fought for two decades. Warnings by the UN and other aid agencies of a humanitarian catastrophe went largely unheeded, despite reports that famine and starvation were forcing parents to sell their babies or men were selling their kidneys to feed their near and dear ones.

Pledges were made but very little aid arrived, certainly not enough to stave off hunger or feed malnourished babies.

Aid was conditional on the Afghan Taliban acquiescing in the international demand for a broad-based inclusive government, women's education and respect for human rights. Given the Taliban's intransigence, there was little hope of assistance but the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have shifted the focus entirely from Afghanistan. There is no denying that the war clouds hovering over Europe continue to darken ominously as the situation in Ukraine gets more desperate and more dangerous. This means that the reopening of public universities by the Taliban rulers in the first week of last month — one of the key demands of the international community — enabling boys and girls to return to their studies after six months went unnoticed. In late February, the Biden administration relaxed some of the sanctions that had led to the collapse of the Afghan economy and crippled the banking system, but the measures did not do much to counter America's earlier action of seizing half of the frozen \$7bn in Afghan assets, freeing the balance for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan remains dire. It needs food, medical supplies and cash to pay the salaries of teachers and medical staff. Humanitarian assistance that has been given so far falls much below what the country needs. According to the UN's Financial Tracking Service, less than \$29m of the \$4.4bn needed to save Afghanistan from disaster has come in so far.

There is another dimension of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict that might take a toll on Afghanistan: refugees. With more than a million Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war in their country and taking shelter in Europe, millions of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan will now receive little or no attention. There was already donor-fatigue for the Afghan refugees who are now largely dependent on Pakistan, which has its own set of economic problems. This will accentuate in the times to come. Afghanistan with its own economy in ruins, wouldn't be able to take them in while Pakistan may find it difficult to look after them with the meagre resources it has at its disposal. With the new conflict emerging in the middle of Europe, Afghanistan, sadly, looks like a forgotten story now.

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FATF unfairness

IT is no surprise that the FATF, the global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog, has retained Pakistan on its so-called grey list of countries under increased monitoring until June. This is in spite of the significant progress made by Pakistan in completing the required actions and Islamabad's political commitment to implementing a comprehensive action plan as acknowledged by the FATF over the last couple of years.

Pakistan was put on the grey list in June 2018 and has since completely or largely addressed 32 out of 34 action points. The watchdog "encouraged Pakistan to continue to make progress to address the remaining items as soon as possible by continuing to demonstrate that it is enhancing the impact of sanctions by nominating individuals and entities for UN designation and restraining and confiscating proceeds of crime in line with its risk profile".

Energy Minister Hammad Azhar, who is heading Pakistan's efforts to exit the list, said on Saturday that Pakistan's effort to complete the FATF's technical requirements would be acknowledged 'soon'.

However, Pakistan's engagement with the task force is not new. It was placed on the list of jurisdictions under increased monitoring in 2008 and from 2012 to 2015. It is a well-known fact that the watchdog has let many countries off the hook, even though they had done far less to reform their AML/CFT regimes than Pakistan.

Yet Islamabad is being asked for total compliance with the action plan. Chances are that the FATF may keep the country under increased monitoring even beyond June on one pretext or another. There are at least two possible explanations for that.

One, Pakistan's compliance on the technical side may have significantly improved but its effectiveness is still ranked as poor by the FATF as is evident from the consolidated ranking assigned to the country based on the third follow-up report released last month. Two, Islamabad's growing tilt towards China — and recently Russia — is widening the gulf between the country and the West, including the US, allowing India to influence FATF decisions on Pakistan. That completing all actions for effectiveness of the AML/CFT regime is a structural

benchmark of the IMF deal underlines Pakistan's weakening clout in Western capitals.

The government must address the remaining two points of the action plan without further delay. But it also needs to ramp up diplomatic efforts for mustering greater support for its endeavours to restructure its AML/CFT regime and exit the grey list.

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The other casualty in war

IN a move to drown out 'disinformation' about the invasion of Ukraine, the European Union last week officially booted out Russia Today and Sputnik — two major Russian news broadcasters. The sanctions against these media organisations were imposed by the European Commission as well as EU governments and will be legally enforced till the invasion is over. In Britain, RT disappeared from the airwaves as the bloc supplies satellites to UK distributors, but UK Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries justified the removal of the channel, saying she hoped it would not return to British screens. On digital platforms Facebook, Google, TikTok and YouTube, access to RT and Sputnik is also being blocked.

Against the backdrop of the war, these dramatic moves to curtail what many officials have vaguely termed 'Kremlin propaganda' have been rushed through, but their long-term consequences in terms of Russian retaliation as well as freedom of expression are lost on world leaders. The Russian communication regulator has used these sweeping bans to justify its own blocking of Facebook and Twitter, which means ordinary Russians now only have access to the 'Russian propaganda' the West decries. There are reports that the BBC's service, too, is being limited in parts of Russia. As the war hysteria reaches new heights, it is remarkable how little the US, EU and UK are thinking about the implications of the media ban. Censorship, controlling public opinion and blocking information are all hallmarks of a dictatorial regime. Vladimir Putin has often been criticised for being guilty of these tactics in Russia, where orders to newspapers to publish or censor certain news stories are part of daily life. Why then, must the West, which prides itself on its democratic ideals, stoop to such measures which mimic exactly the kind of anti-democratic behaviour President Putin practices?

While the economic sanctions and moves to take action against Russian oligarchs are arguably logical means to limit Moscow's power, the banning of dissent and information that is undesirable to Western powers is setting a dangerous and unwelcome precedent.

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Valuation rates

IT is difficult to welcome the drastic reduction in the property valuation rates the Federal Board of Revenue had notified back in December under the pressure of powerful land developers and realtors. There is no denying the fact that the revised valuation rates in some areas were on the higher side and needed to be rationalised but the way the FBR folded in the face of the pressure last week testifies to the growing political clout of the wealthy real estate market players. The new, decreased valuations will again widen the gaps between the actual market prices of real estate and the rates at which the FBR collects withholding tax and capital gains tax on property transactions. It goes without saying that the rollback is going to significantly and adversely affect the effort to plug the flow of illicit money into real estate, document the large property market and construction industry, and improve the FBR's revenue collection.

Defending the reduction in the new valuation rates, FBR officials say that the board will not gradually raise the rates to narrow the gap between the market prices of property and the rates at which it taxes real estate transactions. That is not a practical solution. The way in which property prices keep moving upwards in the cities, especially in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, means that the FBR will never be able to catch up with the market through a 'gradual' increase in the valuation rates. The land prices have spiked substantially in the last couple of years since the announcement by the government of a liberal tax amnesty for pushing investments in the housing and construction industry to drive growth, drastically widening the gap between market prices and the FBR valuation rates. If this gap is to be bridged, the board will have to take a bold decision and implement its previous valuations — of course with downward revisions in those areas where the rates were enhanced exorbitantly.

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PM's growing challenge

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan is under pressure. As political developments unfold at a quickening pace and the opposition appears to be finalising its vote of no-confidence move against Mr Khan, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the PTI government is faced with its gravest crisis since it assumed power in 2018. If the party was feeling the heat at the federal level, it is now up against a major challenge in Punjab too.

On Monday, the disgruntled Jahangir Khan Tareen group scored a major victory when Mr Khan's close aide and former senior minister of Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan joined it. Speaking to the media after the group's meeting, Aleem Khan made little attempt to hide his disillusionment with the state of affairs under the PTI government. With the JKT group's numbers swelling, it appears that if they pull back support for the Usman Buzdar government in Punjab, it could be in serious trouble.

The centre and Punjab heating up simultaneously is no coincidence. The opposition wants to pile maximum pressure on the government through the numbers game in the assemblies and via the PPP's long march that is scheduled to reach Rawalpindi and Islamabad today.

Mr Khan's incendiary speech in Mailsi over the weekend is being seen in the context of this increasing pressure on the government. The prime minister used harsh language against his opponents that was unbecoming of a person holding such a high office. He also piled on criticism of the EU and the US at a time when Pakistan needs to balance its relationship between the West and Russia in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. The undiplomatic attack by the prime minister may create diplomatic problems for Pakistan and it is rather unfortunate that his advisers could not convince him to not take such a harsh position publicly.

That said, Mr Khan's strong language and intemperate tone may suggest that he is keeping an eye on the electorate and the narrative that he may choose were he to hit the election campaign trail at some point. Even if that is the case, the prime minister needs to review his stance and his choice of words.

Every sentence he utters may be seen as policy and this requires him to be more circumspect in expressing his sentiments. Statesmanship requires greater control

on emotions and a more restrained approach towards those who have a different view of things.

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International Women's Day

KARACHI: Like every other night, a woman sells dried fruit at her Empress Market stall on Monday. International Women's Day is being observed today with a renewed focus on ensuring better recognition of their domestic labour, which usually goes unappreciated. A recent World Bank report noted Pakistan had done much to facilitate women who work at night.—Shakil Adil / White Star

WOMEN in Pakistan will be silent no more. Each year on March 8, International Women's Day, their voices come together in an ever louder crescendo to demand that their inherent, constitutionally protected rights to dignity, and to security in the private and public domains be upheld. At the same time, while doing so, they are reminded in no uncertain terms of the long road that lies ahead before gender equality comes anywhere within reach of the vast number of their compatriots in the country. As the right-wing in Pakistan grows ever more emboldened in the face of appeasement by the state, their path has become increasingly treacherous — and twisted.

Ever since the Aurat March has evolved into a defining event to mark the day, it has grown starkly clear there is no tolerance for women collectively demanding their rights in such a visible and inclusive way, even when they do so entirely peacefully. For they threaten the edifice of the patriarchy from which flow so many advantages that many men take for granted in conservative societies like ours. That status quo enables them to prey on women in the public space, treat female family members as chattel, beat them and abuse them, and in extreme cases, even kill them in the name of 'honour' — far too often without any accountability whatsoever. And the biggest travesty is that groups which have no compunction committing violence — including murder — in the name of faith, are ready with bogus arguments about the march being contrary to tradition and religious principles. However, truth be told, the misogynistic heart of Pakistani society is laid bare not in the threats and intimidation from these purveyors of hate. It is the government's shameful silence in the face of this aggression that speaks volumes. That the PTI is a party that once excoriated those who

maligned the vocal female supporters thronging its months-long dharna in 2014 makes it doubly reprehensible. Clearly, the women were useful for political point-scoring at the time; otherwise, regressive elements can incite violence against them at will and face no consequences.

And this is why March 8 is so relevant for women in Pakistan. For, despite all the 'pro-women' laws that have been enacted over the last few years, their rights in actual practice remain circumscribed by narrow mindsets and hidebound tradition. In such a place, for a murderer to cast aspersions on his female victim's character can be a viable strategy; and here, a court can set an honour killer free on appeal largely because he did not expressly say he took his sister's life for the sake of honour. One step forward and two steps back. The women of Pakistan have had enough. They will make themselves heard. And it is the government's duty to see they come to no harm while doing so.

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Rocky road for PM

THE day of reckoning for the PTI government may be at hand with the submission of a no-trust motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan by the combined opposition after weeks of political manoeuvring and deliberations. The question now is: will he survive this move?

Even though the onus of proof that Mr Khan has lost the confidence of the National Assembly is on the opposition, the odds, at least for now, appear stacked against him. Mr Khan, facing a bigger threat from within his party, has a maximum of 21 days to defeat the motion.

The Constitution binds the speaker to summon the Assembly session not more than 14 days after receiving the requisition, which has also been filed, for a vote on the resolution after "the expiration of three days" and no "later than seven days" from the commencement of the sitting.

Explainer: How does a no-confidence motion work?

Similar moves have failed previously. Benazir Bhutto survived a no-confidence vote in 1989 though the opposition had the full backing of the then president and the establishment. Thus, the next three weeks are not only a test of Mr Khan's

capabilities to win back the support of disgruntled PTI lawmakers and keep his allies on his side but also of the opposition parties' to retain the crucial backing of dissident treasury members until the last moment.

Indeed, a sitting government has enough clout to win back rebellious lawmakers and create divisions in the opposition. But now it is near impossible for the PM to bridge the gulf he has created between himself and his old friends Jehangir Tarin and Aleem Khan. For now, he isn't in a position to give them what they want — Punjab — without losing the PML-Q's support. Likewise, opposition benchers will think twice before jumping ship when the government is at its weakest.

Mr Khan may have responded to the move with characteristic bravado, but he has been betraying signs of desperation for weeks. Although there is no evidence of the establishment's involvement in the current crisis — in fact, in a break from its usual practice, it should continue to keep away from politics for the sake of democratic traditions — the PM's tensions with the military over the ISI chief's appointment also appear to have cast his government in a vulnerable light. His unnecessary statement that he has until November to decide on the extension of the army chief's tenure is also seen in this context.

Whatever the truth of his relations with the military, the opposition has used the situation to its advantage. And whether or not he survives the no-trust vote, it is time for him to think hard about the factors that have brought together a deeply divided opposition and his close associates on one platform for the purpose of ousting him. By relentlessly using NAB and other federal agencies, Mr Khan has made enemies even out of friends.

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Forced to flee

YET another humanitarian crisis entirely of human making has compelled more than a million people to flee the comfort and safety of their homes. Millions more are expected to follow. In Ukraine, as bombs drop and bullets fly, families are being uprooted — forced to pack the entirety of their lives in small bags and escape to safety in strange lands. They have been fortunate to find accommodating neighbours in Poland, Hungary, Moldova, Romania and Slovakia, where both governments and citizens have received them with open

arms. The Western press too has been sympathetic to their plight, filling their pages with the lament of those displaced as well as with glowing commentaries on how they have been welcomed. Compassion dictates that those forced to abandon their homes not be begrudged the small decencies shown to them. However, the magnanimity with which Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed and the racist undertones of most media coverage does bring forth some unpleasant memories. Of the way those not born with “blue eyes and blonde hair” (as one BBC commentator described Ukrainian refugees) were spurned by European nations and forced to watch their children drown in the Mediterranean Sea. Of how some “civilised” countries slammed their doors shut to those seeking refuge from war, when war was raging in some part of the “developing world”.

Indeed, the world seems to have temporarily forgotten that 86pc of the 26.4m refugees from before the Ukraine crisis are still being hosted by other developing countries; deprived of most rights and with little option but to rely on the charity of donors in order to be able to meet even basic human needs. In the fog of this latest crisis, the 6.7m refugees forced to flee their homes in Syria, the 5.7m uprooted from Palestine, 2.6m Afghans, 4m Venezuelans, 2.2m Sudanese and 1.1m mostly Rohingya refugees driven from their homes in Myanmar cannot be allowed to be erased from public memory, even temporarily. While no amount of welcome can ever erase the pain of losing one’s home, perhaps the gradual realisation in the “developed” world that war inflicts misery without regard to race or religion can be a catalyst for positive change. We need narratives and policies that encourage better assimilation of displaced peoples without regard to their place of origin and to avoid victimising them for getting caught up in wars not of their choosing.

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Advancing telemedicine

BESIDES poor management and the lack of medical resources and infrastructure in the healthcare sector, the chronic shortage of doctors in both the rural areas and cities, continues to remain unaddressed. But even in grim circumstances there can be reason to hope. During the dark days of the pandemic, people with conditions such as heart disease and diabetes were advised to stay away from

the Covid-infected corridors of overwhelmed medical outlets where doctors tended to growing numbers of coronavirus cases. To cater to the health needs of those who were unable to visit the doctor, a number of telemedicine services sprang up in major cities of the country. Though not unknown previously, their potential has grown significantly. Mobile and online technology can help link basic health units and rural health networks to health tech initiatives where doctors can dispense medical advice and supervise manageable ailments. Through these portals, doctors can also perform other functions of primary healthcare, including information collection, disease surveillance, providing nutritional and reproductive health guidance to women and monitoring child growth. True, there are challenges — for instance, online facilities are often inaccessible and women do not possess a mobile phone. But these are factors that can be addressed over time, especially as the demand for telehealth services is growing — including for follow-up consultations after an initial in-person visit.

Health-tech start-ups can also play a useful role in increasing the number of doctors by bringing back to work the 60pc of women MBBS graduates who are not practising because of family and other social constraints. A recent report in this paper, recounted how one such initiative did just that, and how women doctors were able to give medical advice on reproductive and child health to patients in Afghanistan where healthcare after the war is in a shambolic state. The relevant authorities would do well to facilitate such services in a country where there are reportedly only 130,000 doctors for a population of more than 220m.

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Establishment's role

EVER SINCE the opposition parties announced their plans of ousting Prime Minister Imran Khan through a vote of no-confidence, many have been asking which side the security establishment supports. The answer, they believe, will help them place safe bets on the outcome of the opposition's no-trust motion.

Given the military's long-standing sway over Pakistan politics and influence on virtually every political party, including many posturing as anti-establishment outfits, this is not surprising. So far, the PTI leadership has maintained that the

‘security establishment is with Pakistan’, insisting that it stands with the government in these difficult times.

However, the combined opposition contends that the establishment is now neutral, implying that it no longer backs the ruling party for which it allegedly paved the way for electoral success in 2018. Indeed, there is no evidence so far to show that the establishment is behind the opposition’s move against Imran Khan. Yet many have doubts regarding the security establishment’s neutrality in the current crisis.

Unfortunately, the establishment has a long history of meddling in politics. It has directly ruled the country for three decades. Analysts have pointed out that when not ruling directly, it has pulled strings from behind the scenes to oust elected governments, propped up pressure groups, created divisions in parties to split their vote bank, financed opposition parties to destabilise elected set-ups, etc. in order to maintain its grip on political power. It is widely perceived that politicians have always needed the armed forces’ support to come to power. We have seen politicians occasionally stand up to the military’s dominance and political interference, but there has never been a dearth of civilian leaders willing to do the establishment’s bidding for a share in power.

In recent years, the establishment has expanded its role beyond domestic politics and national security to governance and foreign and economic policies. It is not incorrect to say that its presence can be felt in every sphere — including the media, judiciary and business. Little wonder that the current set-up under Imran Khan, who was allegedly aided by the intelligence agencies in the 2018 polls, is labelled as a ‘hybrid regime’.

The establishment responds forcefully to every civilian effort to limit the military to its constitutional function of defending the nation against foreign aggression by undermining elected governments and distorting democracy. At the same time, the pretence of neutrality and support for democratic dispensations is kept up.

A military spokesman told a presser in January that the army didn’t need to enter the political fray, nor should it be dragged into it, in response to the opposition’s allegations of political meddling. If the military leadership really meant this, here’s a chance to prove its stance and refrain from siding with either the ruling party or the opposition in their democratic fight in the Assembly.

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Swap transplants

IRONICALLY, the Punjab government's recent step in the effort to stop organ trafficking may well end up providing a shot in the arm to the illegal transplant racket. At a meeting chaired by the Punjab health minister, the provincial government has given its approval to a swap transplant plan which expands the living donor pool beyond immediate family members. According to the law, a living donor must be "a close blood relative" (the term includes spouse); if such a donor is not available, an evaluation committee may allow a "non-close blood relative" to donate. In all situations, however, the transplantation must be "voluntary, genuinely motivated and without any duress or coercion". Organ swap transplants, or paired exchanges, work by matching a recipient-donor pair that is medically incompatible, with another pair in a similar predicament. An organ 'swap' can then take place between the two pairs. However, these are only the bare bones of the procedure. It must be carried out according to strict ethical and clinical guidelines if it is not to open the floodgates for illegal transplants. Among these is the requirement that each recipient-donor pair must meet the eligibility criteria laid out in the law. Moreover, the age, renal function and tissue match of the two donors must be similar, so that the transplant swap has similar chances of success. Both transplantation procedures should also take place simultaneously to preclude a situation where one donor backs out after the recipient related to them has received their donated organ.

Thus, while paired exchanges are an accepted method of addressing donor-recipient incompatibility, the level of oversight mechanisms needed to prevent abuse are daunting — even more so in an unequal society riddled with corruption. The first paired kidney exchange in Pakistan was performed in 2015 at the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi; only seven more have taken place since then — all at SIUT — partly because of the extreme diligence that the process calls for. The troubling fact is that most illegal transplants take place in Punjab; some were found to have been carried out surreptitiously in KP and Azad Kashmir by doctors from Punjab. The situation in recent years had improved considerably after several organ trafficking gangs were busted, again mostly in Punjab. Does the province have a system in place to ensure that unethical individuals do not use the organ swap programme as a cover for illegal transplants?

Cattle disease outbreak

THE outbreak of lumpy skin disease in cows and buffaloes in a number of areas of Sindh and Punjab is causing much trepidation among dairy and small cattle farmers. As the federal authorities await the completion of formalities for the import of 50,000 vaccines, farmers with sick animals have so far largely been left in the lurch without any government assistance. So far, around 67 cattle heads have died while between 18,000 and 20,000 are said to be affected by LSD in Sindh, with more than 15,000 cases in Karachi alone. A substantial number of cases have also been reported from almost all other districts of Sindh and from Bahawalpur in Punjab. Meanwhile, as the demand for chicken meat grows in Karachi, retailers have had an excuse to jack up the prices to as much as Rs570 per kilo, according to a report in this paper.

Though news reports published earlier in the week quoted cattle farmers in Hyderabad as saying that they had not received any guidance from the local veterinary centres run by the livestock department, the matter was taken up by the National Assembly's Standing Committee on National Food Security and Research on Wednesday. The meeting decided to set up response centres in the affected areas and launch a robust awareness campaign for farmers and the general public. It was also decided that till such time the import of the LSD vaccine is approved and it becomes available, the goat pox vaccine will be used to vaccinate cattle to protect against LSD. The use of the goat pox vaccine has been approved by the animal husbandry commissioner as it is also said to be effective against LSD. However, detailed guidelines for the treatment and management of sick animals have yet to be issued by the federal task force constituted to control the situation. It would be better if the authorities took stock of the situation without delay so that the disease can be controlled before it spreads to the other provinces.

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Acrimony worsens

THE vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan has unleashed a fresh wave of political instability in the country. Ever since the opposition parties

submitted the document to the Speaker, National Assembly Office, there has been a flurry of activity that is gaining in intensity with each passing hour.

It is also fuelling a bitter and nasty war of words between the government and opposition camps as evidenced by one press conference after another. The charges being made and the accusations being hurled at the opponents from these platforms range from corruption to anti-national activities. The situation is expected to deteriorate and could reach ominous levels if this matter drags on.

What is making matters even more complicated is the concern for the physical safety of the parliamentarians. The police action inside the Parliament Lodges in Islamabad on Thursday evening and the arrest of elected JUI-F members indicate that the situation is deteriorating swiftly. The opposition says they are worried that the government will use force to block the participation in the proceedings of its members who may vote against the prime minister.

The government on the other hand is now peddling a strange interpretation of the floor-crossing clause saying that a party leader can have his members disqualified on charges of defection even before they have actually crossed the floor. It is a bizarre position to take but even cabinet members are now advocating it.

The speaker has two weeks within which he has to call the session for the vote of no-confidence. It is now getting clear that any delay in summoning the Assembly would invite further chaos and threaten the stability of the country. The government claims it faces no danger from the opposition and has its majority intact. If that is indeed the case then it has no reason to delay the voting.

The vote of no-confidence is a constitutional process and it must be allowed to proceed as per the law. Both sides must do everything they can to de-escalate the situation and follow the laid-down procedure to the last detail. No party head can stop any of his members from voting; doing so would be a travesty. The country is suffering from this instability and the stock market is reflecting this anxiousness. The speaker has the responsibility to live up to the demands of his high office and not aggravate the situation by displaying extreme partisanship.

History will not be kind to those who fail to rise to the occasion and do the right thing. There is therefore a dire need to expedite the proceedings and halt the use of strong-arm tactics. There is too much riding on a smooth resolution of the

issue and the country cannot afford another blow to the already weak system. The nation awaits with bated breath.

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Nuanced approach

IN a country that has suffered years of terrorist mayhem, a weary public tends to see most violent crimes as falling within the ambit of terrorism. However, the criminal justice system must be more circumspect. But because it has not been so, Pakistan's anti-terrorism courts are choked with cases that really do not belong there — their gravity notwithstanding. On July 30, 2021, there was a backlog of 3,804 cases pending trial in the ATCs in Sindh alone. So instead of these special courts deciding cases within seven days after indictment as required by the ATA, even high-profile trials remain pending for years. It is therefore heartening to see some ATCs applying their mind to this aspect of justice dispensation as well. Recently, the judge of an ATC in Karachi while announcing the verdict in a kidnapping for ransom and murder case observed that kidnapping for ransom did not fall within the ambit of terrorism. If law-enforcement agencies and courts continue to act judiciously, the ATCs' caseload can be considerably lightened.

The most significant step in rationalising the proceedings before the ATCs came in November 2019 when the Supreme Court provided much-needed clarity about what precisely constitutes terrorism. A seven-member bench in a 59-page judgement authored by then Supreme Court chief justice Asif Saeed Khosa held that while the definition of 'terrorism' in the ATA was overly broad, parliament, through the course of several amendments, had arrived at a definition fairly consistent with the international perception of terrorism. The ATA in its present iteration describes terrorism as a "crime with the object and purpose of destabilising society or the government with a view to achieving objectives which are political in the extended sense of the word". Mens rea, rather than the fallout or potential fallout, is critical in determining whether an act constitutes terrorism. The verdict, however, held that the courts have not always been correct in their reading of the law, and directed them to reexamine their interpretation in which "the shifting of focus from the effect of the action to the design or purpose behind the action had not been noticed". For instance, a number of crimes — including

extortion and kidnapping for ransom — often stem from a desire for personal profit or for vengeance. Only by taking a nuanced approach pegged on the apex court's judgement can the ATCs streamline their work and dispense justice in the manner they were meant to.

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The 100m milestone

THERE is scarcely a national challenge that cannot be overcome with consensus and strong political will. The federal government's achievement in fully vaccinating 100m people in the country over nine months is proof that great obstacles can be overcome if those in power are willing to put in the effort. In real terms, according to the latest figures, it means that the National Command and Operation Centre has been able to administer more than 218m doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. More than 101m people are fully vaccinated while 4.8m have also received their booster shots. With up to 2m vaccine doses being dispensed on a daily basis, the NCOC appears well on its way to immunising all eligible citizens in the country over the next few months.

Indeed, officials and staff at the NCOC must be lauded for their consistent work in reaching this important milestone. It is also on account of a robust and efficient vaccination campaign that many medical experts are now expressing the hope that most Pakistanis have developed at least short-term immunity against Covid-19. This evaluation is also reflected in the steady decline in cases and mortalities from the Covid-19 infection. The NCOC reported yesterday that four people had passed away in the country from the severity of the infection in the preceding 24 hours. The mortality figure for the two previous days was six and nine. That no new critical cases were reported yesterday is also a good sign, with the national positivity rate hovering around 1.8pc. However, despite the encouraging situation, the authorities should not become complacent. Strict vigilance and monitoring of the situation should continue until the world is rid of the new variants that have been emerging. Cases of Stealth Omicron (BA.2) variant, said to be 30pc more transmissible than Omicron, have been reported from several countries including India, Sweden, Denmark and the UK. Those in power should continue to advocate mask-wearing, vaccinate more people and stress on booster shots.

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Scourge of trafficking

A RECENTLY published HRCP report has shed light on the alarming practice of human trafficking in the country. The report titled Modern slavery: Trafficking in Women and Girls in Pakistan describes Pakistan as a “source, transit and destination country for trafficking”. However, the real issue, according to the findings, pertains to internal trafficking “especially forced or bonded labour”. Although human trafficking gangs have existed in the country for decades, running forced begging rings, providing adults and children as fodder for bonded labour, and forcing women and girls into prostitution, there is little reliable data about this disturbing trend. Because of this, the report says, it is difficult to assess the true magnitude of trafficking. Considering that 151 girls have been recovered from Sargodha only since Jan 5 this year by the Punjab police, and 3,571 girls and women remain missing across the province, as reported by this paper last month, one can make an intelligent guess at the extent of this menace.

What is also unfortunate is the apathy of the law enforcers. Most cases of missing women and girls are registered as abductions or kidnappings or simply categorised as ‘elopement’ by police officials. As we have noted in this space before, in many cases the police do not even register a complaint when women and girls from poor families go missing. This indifference stems in large part from what the report describes as the lack of “capacity and understanding of human trafficking” in police ranks. Meanwhile, the challenges of intra-agency communication involving the provincial and federal law-enforcement agencies remain a big hurdle, with the institutional confusion showing up in the non-implementation of the recommendations of a national action plan to curb trafficking. This grim picture is not likely to improve unless the authorities develop the capabilities of the police and provide them with the needed resources, as well as devise a detailed policy on identifying and reporting cases of human trafficking. Additionally, the rehabilitation of victimised women and girls must be given due attention.

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Fighting outside parliament

DEMOCRACY is noisy — and that's the beauty of it. However, it can get messy when those in power start using the state machinery and resort to violence to suppress their opponents.

There can be no two opinions that the JUI-F's decision to bring volunteers of the 'banned' Ansarul Islam to the Parliament Lodges on Thursday night was unwarranted. But it did not justify the use of excessive force, and deployment of a large posse of police commandos and the anti-terrorist force to expel them from the official residences of the parliamentarians. And while the JUI-F's action may be difficult to condone, it is hard to dismiss the logic behind it in the larger political context.

The introduction of a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan a few days back has stirred passions among the PTI leader's colleagues and supporters. Mr Khan himself has been constantly sounding warnings of dire consequences for the leadership of the opposition political parties ever since — and even before. Many are anticipating the arrest of both opposition lawmakers and treasury members suspected of siding with Mr Khan's rivals ahead of the vote on the motion.

If the JUI-F is to be blamed for sending Ansarul Islam members to the Parliament Lodges to 'protect' to its legislators from any real or perceived threat, the government is equally responsible for its needless and excessive response. By turning the official residences into a battlefield for hours, it has only further damaged the PTI government's public image. The ugly situation could easily have been avoided by involving the National Assembly speaker, who, as custodian of the House, is responsible for ensuring that no one is forcibly stopped from casting their vote.

However, the government does not appear to want to bring down the political temperatures. Warnings from Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid that the government would not let anyone take the law into their own hands is not helping to defuse the growing tension. Chances are that the bitterness between the two sides will increase in the run-up to the vote on the combined opposition's motion.

The ruling party has already planned a public meeting near parliament a day before the vote and is urging its supporters to reach there in large numbers. To many, it shows that the prime minister and his team have decided to first fight the no-trust motion outside the Assembly as their grip on their legislators loosens and allies such as the PML-Q demand a higher price for their support. That does not bode well for democracy as the country cannot afford further divisions.

If the situation gets worse and leads to violence because of the uncalled-for actions of the ruling PTI, it will further disillusion those who already believe that politicians are thugs who cannot think beyond power and self-interest.

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Risky relief

IN promising generous fuel and electricity subsidies as the spectre of a possible ouster raises its head, Prime Minister Imran Khan has shown that his metamorphosis into a brand of politician he once despised is now complete. The relief provides some much-needed protection to citizens burnt by unrelenting inflation. However, as global oil markets are rocked by the Ukraine crisis and prices of the commodity threaten to shoot to historic highs, his gambit risks putting immense pressure on the economy. Fixing fuel and electricity prices for a four-month period at a time of increased global uncertainty is a high-risk bet. Its payout will be mostly political and accrue solely to the PTI, but the bill — expected to run into several hundred billion rupees — will be indirectly footed by Pakistan's taxpayers. The government claims it has the money, but it is not clear how or even if it had budgeted for the turbulence in international markets. There have been harrowing glimpses of how high prices can go, especially if Opec does not increase supplies or if Russia cuts off oil and gas to Europe. The situation is akin to plugging a finger into a high-pressure line — the results can be catastrophic if the PM's luck runs out. This is cynical behaviour for a party that professes to put national interests ahead of its own.

In fact, there are striking similarities between the PTI's move and what its bitter rival, the PML-N, attempted (with futility) under Shahid Khaqan Abbasi on the eve of its departure in April 2018. Then, as now, the government — facing the possibility of removal — had taken a gamble with the economy to win over voters (and the establishment) by lavishing subsidies and tax cuts and jacking up the

defence budget without having sufficient fiscal space to do so. The relief measures were to take effect shortly before the July 2018 elections, and any new government that came in was to foot the bill. It was clear then, as now, that those who had made the decisions had given very little thought to the long-term costs. Elected officials have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that public monies are spent on the good of the people. The blatant self-interest shown by the country's top political leadership is a clear breach of that trust. Governments should not be willing to stake the economy in their desperate bids to protect and safeguard their own political interests.

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Missile misadventure

IT was an incident that could have had catastrophic results. Luckily, the crashing of an Indian missile in Mian Channu on Wednesday was met by a measured response by the Pakistan armed forces that refrained from military retaliation.

A statement from India admits that it was an accident but does not go far enough to explain how such a dangerous 'mishap' could have happened. The statement also does not render a clear and unambiguous apology to Pakistan.

The response from Pakistan has been categorical and demands answers that are necessary to determining how exactly this provocation happened and what India intends to do to ensure it does not recur. Even so, Pakistan should review its own defence system to find any loopholes that may need to be plugged in case there is another incident of the kind.

There is, however, the matter of framing this incident within the larger context of tense relations between two nuclear powers. It is a miracle that the incident has not extracted a bigger price. Whizzing through the Pakistani airspace at the height that it did, the missile could have hit a commercial aircraft leading to unimaginable consequences. It could have crashed into a populated area and caused damage to life and property. It could have also triggered a military response thereby resulting in a conflagration through misunderstanding and miscommunication.

We were lucky. But this luck must never be tested again.

The incident has exposed the grave weakness in India's technology and its safety systems. This should not be only Pakistan's concern; the international community must also demand greater transparency from India. For a nuclear-armed country to be so shoddy with its technology and so weak with its command and control systems is cause for serious alarm across the world. In particular, the safety mechanisms of strategic weapons and the security protocols in place to ensure no accident takes place are well established among all nuclear states.

This missile incident unfortunately proves that India's systems are either weak, or compromised, or both. The relevant international agencies should demand to inspect India's systems and verify that the weakness and loopholes have been addressed to the satisfaction of all. Pakistan has the right to have access to this information because it is directly affected by any incompetence on India's part in handling its strategic weapons.

The incident is a wake-up call for both India and Pakistan with regard to the safety of a nuclear South Asia. It must be treated with the seriousness that it merits and not minimised as a minor accident whose probe remains hidden from public view. It is also in this context that, as nuclear rivals, both Pakistan and India should ensure that communication channels are always open to avert the risk of such incidents in the future.

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Ruling on ordinances

THE authority to legislate by executive decree such as exists in Pakistan is not, for obvious reasons, often found in democratic countries. However, the power to promulgate ordinances is far from unfettered, and on Thursday the Supreme Court reminded the PTI government of the stringent preconditions in the Constitution that are attached to the process. Ruling against the excessive promulgation of ordinances, the two-judge bench observed that an ordinance could only be issued in "emergent matters", where a situation warrants "immediate action", and at a point in time when neither the Upper nor Lower House is in session. According to the bench: "In the absence of even one of the stated preconditions, neither the president nor the governors can promulgate ordinances." It also underscored the importance of observing the limits

prescribed in the fundamental law of the land, saying: “History is testament to the fact that whenever the Constitution is violated it disrespects the people for whom it was made.”

To forestall debate is to smother the spirit of democracy. That is why the promulgation of ordinances is to be seen as an exception and not the norm. The fact that ordinances automatically lapse unless passed by the relevant representatives of the people within a stipulated period of time illustrates the primacy that the Constitution accords to the legislatures. The apex court’s ruling throws a spanner in the works of what has become the PTI government’s well-oiled ordinance production line, which it has repeatedly used to sidestep parliament and ride roughshod over the opposition. Last month for instance, it went to the extent of cancelling a scheduled session of parliament at the eleventh hour — an unprecedented step — and then proceeded to issue the draconian Peca ordinance two days later, which was a Sunday. Such arbitrary use of powers meant to be used judiciously in only extraordinary situations is a stepping stone towards autocracy. The Islamabad High Court was informed last year that the PTI government had promulgated at least 54 presidential ordinances in the first three years of its tenure. However, the fact is, almost all governments have been guilty of this ‘sin of commission’. While military regimes have, unsurprisingly, issued the highest number of ordinances at over 63 per year, elected governments too have promulgated around 30 ordinances annually on average. This speaks to the inherent weakness of democratic institutions in the country, and the apex court’s ruling has come none too soon.

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Authoritarian streak

A COURT this week declared the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement chief, Manzoor Pashteen, and four others proclaimed offenders in a sedition case registered in 2018 — a development that appears to follow a well-established pattern when it comes to the state’s high-handed and zero-tolerance approach towards the group. The PTM chief and his aides were booked in a case for allegedly “delivering hate speeches against the security establishment at public meetings” in May 2018, nearly four years ago. The ATC judge expressed anger at the investigating officer for not arresting Manzoor Pashteen, who has recently

appeared at demonstrations held by his group outside the Sindh Assembly. These protests were organised to decry the protracted incarceration of Ali Wazir, a PTM leader and an MNA, who has been booked in multiple cases but denied freedom since 2020 despite being given bail in one case. Mr Wazir's detention took place when the Sindh government, that was prompt in registering the case, demanded his arrest in Peshawar and ensured he was brought to Karachi to be locked up in prison.

The state's harassment and targeting of the PTM is no secret. All too often, the group's fundamental rights are trampled on — be it through prolonged imprisonment, denial of PTM members' entry to a city or airport or a flurry of cases against them. It points to the autocratic tendencies of a state that cannot tolerate criticism against the establishment. In the past, the PTM has been accused of operating a 'foreign agenda' or accused of being paid by 'hostile foreign governments', but the evidence of these allegations is yet to surface. In a democratic set-up, the persecution of a movement and its lawmakers is a travesty — and the fact that the Sindh government has enabled and facilitated such behaviour is shameful. The arbitrary and heavy-handed approach witnessed against the PTM will only further reinforce the movement's message to its considerable following — that the state is infringing on their human rights with impunity.

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Allowing hate

THE decision by tech giant Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, to temporarily allow violent speech on its platforms in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an ill-considered move whose repercussions go well beyond the war in Europe. The company — which has faced mounting criticism over the past few months over its repeated failure to prevent its platforms from being used to promote violence — now seems to be adding fuel to an already raging fire. This is reflected in a statement from the UN voicing alarm over its new policy, describing it as a complex issue that raises concerns over international humanitarian laws. Meta claims that allowing statements like "death to Russian invaders" is important to ensuring freedom of speech, arguing that this is "an expression of self-defence reacting to the invasion of Ukraine".

However, wartime rhetoric often metastasizes, sweeping rationality and compassion away with it. It defies reasoning why Facebook thinks such violent expressions will not worsen the animosity between Ukraine and Russia. The UN rights office correctly warns the policy could lead to hate speech directed at Russian citizens as well.

Meta's policy on 'expressions of self-defence' is also strikingly hypocritical if viewed through the lens of its past actions in South Asia. It is now well-documented that Facebook has actively censored users living under Indian occupation in Jammu and Kashmir. It actively uses its algorithms to manipulate content that is critical of India's occupation and colonial policies in the region, according to a September 2021 report by Stand With Kashmir, an independent, transnational rights movement led by the Kashmiri diaspora. These are examples of clear suppression of the same freedoms Meta wants for the people fighting the occupation of Ukraine. Are people living under occupation in Kashmir any less deserving of the right to condemn their oppressors? Should this be taken as yet another example of the way Western media, and now social media, has racialised the coverage of war?

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Fears of violence

IN a political milieu, where everyone holds strong beliefs and opinions, it is but natural that any attempt to remove a party and its leader from power — even through a constitutional process — will stir up passions and controversies. Thus, it is not surprising to see the prime minister and other PTI politicians disparaging the leadership of the opposition political parties day in and day out since the announcement of the latter's plans to try and oust the government through a vote of no-confidence.

The bitterness is increasing by the minute since the submission of the motion on Tuesday, with Prime Minister Imran Khan, and his close elected and unelected aides, using indecent and often threatening language against the top leadership of the opposition. The fear is that this acrimony might intensify in the run-up to the vote and the slurs escalate into violence against opposition lawmakers as well as PTI dissidents suspected of siding with Mr Khan's opponents.

Several ministers, including Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, have already sounded warnings to party dissidents that PTI workers would surround their homes (to prevent them from voting on the motion). Now the PTI is planning a large rally outside parliament a day before voting on the resolution.

The opposition is thinking of responding in kind on the same day, thus fuelling fears of clashes between their respective workers. If this happens, it will be disastrous for politics and the democratic system. What took place at the Parliament Lodges on Thursday will seem trivial by comparison. If there is a time to de-escalate, it is now.

Editorial: Turning Parliament Lodges into a battlefield for hours has only further damaged PTI gov't's public image

Indeed, there is nothing wrong about engaging in a robust political fight. However, the onus to defuse tensions that could lead to violence lies with the ruling party. To call a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister is a constitutional and democratic right of the opposition parties, and should not be interfered with in any manner. It is the responsibility of the government and the speaker of the National Assembly to ensure that all lawmakers, whether they belong to the opposition or ruling party, are protected and facilitated in casting their vote according to their conscience. In case some PTI members vote against their party leader, they can be proceeded against according to the law. Threats of violence only betray the nervousness of the rulers.

The combined opposition should also stay away from entering a show-of-strength contest even if the ruling party does not call off its planned rally. It has made its choice and filed the motion to achieve its political target. If it has to show its 'strength', it should do so inside the National Assembly on the day of voting on the motion. The country is already passing through one of its most painful economic crises and cannot afford further instability that invariably accompanies aggravated tensions.

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Missing empathy

THE continued failure of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances to achieve any meaningful progress on implementing its mandate remains an

abhorrent stain on Pakistan's already dismal human rights record. According to a recent report submitted to the Islamabad High Court, the commission claims to have ensured the return of some 3,284 missing persons over the past 11 years, out of a total of 8,463 missing. Another 1,500 have been traced to internment centres or jails. While the achievement is commendable, it is arguably quite modest given the enormity of injustice the commission was formed to remedy. It is also diminished by the fact that, in this same period, the commission failed to ensure the production of 550 disappeared individuals despite the issuance of production orders. More disturbingly, 228 individuals on the missing persons list were found to have been killed in 'encounters', with no individual or entity held to account for the extrajudicial killings thus far.

Indeed, instead of coming up with actionable advice and recommendations for the government on how to put a much-needed end to this most grievous injustice, the commission seems to have limited itself by "assuming the role of a mere post office", in the words of the IHC chief justice. This self-inflicted 'helplessness' betrays either an inadequate understanding of the pains and tribulations of the families of missing persons or a disregard for constitutional decrees regarding the primacy of human freedoms and the right to due process and fair trial. While the commission has dragged its feet, the families of those disappeared have continued to run pillar to post in their desperation to find a sympathetic ear. In many cases, they have been shunned by society and held guilty by association for the unproven (and even non-existent) 'crimes' of their missing loved ones. It is a painful burden to bear. Many of the disappeared were primary bread earners for their families: in their absence, their spouses, children or dependent parents have been damned to impoverishment for no fault of their own. The government, which has on many occasions expressed a desire to meaningfully address the missing persons issue, would do well to shake things up at the commission. A first step could be to appoint a new head whose attention is not occupied with other responsibilities. There is no dearth of candidates with demonstrated expertise in understanding and litigating cases concerning enforced disappearances.

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Faulty narrative

AS the country braces for another political crisis, it is becoming increasingly clear that the government is doing precious little to calibrate its intensity. In fact, if the statements of the ministers and advisers are anything to go by, the ruling party looks to be increasing the political temperature.

At the heart of this turmoil is the upcoming vote of no-confidence and the visible tension in the PTI camp as the numbers game looks more in favour of the opposition. The danger is that the government may take steps that could inject complications into what is a fairly straightforward constitutional process.

Fearing that a significant number of his own MNAs might be ready to vote against Prime Minister Imran Khan, cabinet ministers have been peddling a strange logic according to which the National Assembly speaker can disqualify such members even before they vote, or bar them from voting. He can do neither. Yet such is the confusion being spread by seemingly responsible people that the ruling party and its supporters have internalised this misplaced logic as narrative. Legal experts have clarified that every MNA's right to vote is protected by the Constitution and he or she cannot be stopped from exercising this right.

The disqualification clause is equally clear. If the member crosses the floor by casting the vote against their party, they are liable to be disqualified. If he or she is fine with taking this risk, that too is a right that can be exercised. For the ruling party to mangle this simple process by peddling wrong interpretations is not only unfortunate, it is also dangerous if it can lead to obstructing a constitutionally valid process.

Even more dangerous is the PTI's decision to hold a rally at D-Chowk a day before the voting. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has issued a statement that can be construed as a warning to the MNAs planning to take part in the vote of no-confidence. He said all those going to parliament will have to make their way through this crowd of PTI supporters and return the same way after casting their votes. The PM's aide Shahbaz Gill has also said something equally disturbing. He said photos of those voting against the PM would be placed in their cities and PTI supporters will garland them with shoes.

Such statements can easily incite violence at a time when tempers are running high and logic low. It is therefore advisable that the government de-escalate the situation by making it clear that it will not obstruct the vote of no-confidence and follow the letter and spirit of the law. It should also desist from using incendiary language that can incite passions. There is no harm in holding a rally as long as it does not affect the proceedings of parliament.

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SBP's unclear signal

'TIS the season of keeping your options open. While it is easy to appreciate the reasons that are preventing the prime minister's allies from choosing a side in the no-confidence resolution against him, it is hard to comprehend the State Bank's reluctance to take a firm monetary policy decision. The SBP kept its policy rate unchanged last Tuesday at 9.75pc against market expectations in a volatile global and domestic economic environment. It cautioned that it could raise the rate ahead of the next monetary policy committee meeting scheduled for April 19 to "safeguard external and price stability". The confusing signal has had quite an unsettling impact on the market, with cut-off yields in the public debt auction the very next morning going up by between 96bps and 130bps for papers of different tenors. The decision to hold the rate is widely speculated to have been driven by the present challenges facing the government amid the opposition's move to remove the prime minister rather than by economic considerations. It can only be hoped that this was not the case.

This is not the first time that the debt market has disregarded the central bank's decision. In December, we saw the central bank raise the rate by 100bps, saying, "it felt that the end goal of a mildly positive real interest rate on a forward-looking basis was now close to being achieved". Looking ahead, it expected the rate to remain unchanged in the near term. Still, the market did not respond to it, and the bank had to repeatedly provide liquidity to the market through unprecedented 63-day OMO injections to bring down the cut-off yields. There are multiple reasons for the market's scepticism of the SBP decision. For starters, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has created uncertainty in international commodity markets and rattled the global financial situation. This could exacerbate Pakistan's current account deficit and stoke higher inflation than is anticipated. Likewise, the market doesn't

seem to agree with the SBP reading of the Rs246bn energy price relief as “fiscal deficit neutral”. On top of that, the anticipated delay in the conclusion of the ongoing review of the IMF programme on the new tax amnesty and relief package and growing political instability in the country aren’t helping at all. Therefore, to avoid adding to the monetary policy uncertainty, the SBP should have either increased the rate to tackle global and domestic trends or kept from cautioning about a possible hike before the next meeting.

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Saudi executions

THE execution of 81 men by Saudi authorities on Saturday — the largest single-day execution in the kingdom’s modern history — is an egregious example of a state arbitrarily depriving individuals of their right to life. The scale of it is shocking — it eclipses even the 1980 execution of 63 militants who had stormed the Holy Kaaba in Makkah in 1979. The right to life forms the bedrock on which all other human rights are based. Though the kingdom insists that all those killed had been provided legal representation and “guaranteed their full rights”, little is known about the cases or legal process that led to the convictions. This is highly problematic, as rights groups have repeatedly pointed out that prisoners of conscience and dissidents have also been put to death in Saudi Arabia, as have individuals who were arrested while they were still children. Activists also question the fairness of trials, especially as the kingdom has repeatedly shown it is notoriously intolerant of dissent.

Indeed, since the kingdom’s last mass execution in January 2016, which had included the execution of prominent dissident and Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, the kingdom has put to death dozens of members of the minority community after charging them with terrorism-related crimes. In 2019, for example, the majority of the 37 individuals executed by Saudi authorities belonged to the community, as did 41 out of the 81 executed on Saturday. Saudi Arabia wants to show the world it is modernising: it cannot also continue to be one of the leading executioners in the world. Western powers’ silence on its practices is also quite cynical, especially as criticism of other countries who execute prisoners has usually been swift and unequivocal. There may be little hope on this front, however: some observers have suggested that the ‘convicts’ may have been executed en masse

to take advantage of Western powers' preoccupation with the invasion of Ukraine, with attendant concerns over oil supplies giving the kingdom some added insulation at this point.

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Unwise positions

APPREHENSIONS of a violent conflict between the ruling PTI and the opposition political parties are growing after the PDM's call for a 'long march' on the federal capital on Pakistan Day. In a tit-for-tat move, the PDM has revived its plan of launching a march to organise a sit-in that could continue until the day of the vote on the combined opposition's no-confidence motion against the prime minister, which is expected to be held on March 28. "We'll pay you back in the same coin," PDM leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman said, reacting to the government's apparent plans of physically stopping the lawmakers from voting on the motion.

While the wisdom of such a counter-move can be contested, the maulana's ire is understandable, especially after the opposition had, in all probability, shelved its own plans of a march after the submission of the no-confidence resolution notice. The announcement by the PTI to hold a rally at D-Chowk on the eve of the vote is clearly meant as a threat to prevent PTI dissenters and opposition lawmakers from turning up to vote on the resolution.

The statement from Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry that anyone who wanted to vote for the no-trust motion would have to pass through a crowd of PTI supporters on their way to and from parliament betrays his party leadership's desperation to use any tool, including the threat of violence, to defeat the motion. It is sad that the ruling party has brought a constitutional battle out of parliament and onto the streets, ignoring the potentially catastrophic consequences for the political system and economy.

Editorial: Govt should de-escalate the situation and make clear it will not obstruct no-confidence vote

PML-Q leader Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, a key ally of the PTI, is right in advising both the government and opposition to call off their rallies. "We can't afford this dangerous confrontation because it will add to the troubles of the inflation-stricken people," he argued.

Indeed, both sides need to take a step back and cancel their plans, which may also interfere with the vote on the resolution or, intentionally or otherwise, keep the parliamentarians from voting according to their conscience.

However, the responsibility of bringing down political temperatures and ensuring the safety of lawmakers rests mainly with the government. The ruling PTI must also not grudge the opposition its right to deploy constitutional means to try and remove the government. Instead of fighting outside parliament, the PTI should focus more on keeping its lawmakers together and allies on its side, and participate in the process in a democratic manner.

Editorial: Govt, opposition should abstain from violence in the lead-up to no-trust vote

It is unfortunate that the PTI does not appear to be in a mood to draw back from its position, as is evident in the belligerent statements that are continuously being issued by its leaders. If something untoward happens in Islamabad due to its intransigence, it will have no one but itself to blame.

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Women's cricket

THE start wasn't ideal: a 107-run thumping by India in their Women's World Cup opener, followed by a seven-wicket defeat to Australia. But since then, Pakistan's women cricketers have gotten better. They only lost by six runs to South Africa before losing by nine runs to Bangladesh in thrillers that really could have gone either way. It meant that Pakistan remain winless in 18 World Cup matches and sit at the bottom of the eight-team round-robin table after four matches in this year's event in New Zealand. The semi-finals appear out of reach, barring a dramatic turnaround in fortunes for the Bismah Maroof-led team. Even then, they would require teams above them to lose. However, there have been impressive individual performances from the Pakistan players and milestones achieved. They need to be celebrated. Their journey of making it to the World Cup, with very little investment in the women's game here, must be hailed. Capt Bismah's maternity leave finished recently and she is at the World Cup with her six-month-old daughter Fatima. Bismah made a half-century against Australia. Against Bangladesh, opener Sidra Ameen recorded Pakistan's highest score at the World

Cup with a fine century. She has progressed to the national team from age-group cricket and a domestic structure where tournaments are few. Spinner Nashra Sandhu, Pakistan's highest wicket-taker at the tournament so far, has troubled top batters and bagged the prized wicket of Indian captain Mithali Raj in the opening game. She had to juggle education and sport, and only made it this far thanks to her family's support.

It is tough to be a woman cricketer in Pakistan. Few are able to make cricket a full-time profession. Right now, Pakistan's talent pool comprises 12 centrally contracted cricketers, with eight in the emerging category. These women have broken barriers all the way to be where they are. This is only the fifth time Pakistan are competing at a World Cup. With more matches and more competition, they will grow. PCB chairman Ramiz Raja has been quick to point out that the women's game needs investment and the calendar needs to be regularised. He stressed he wants to start a Pakistan Super League for women. That is probably the push that women's cricket in the country needs. Once that happens, results will follow. But for now, all Pakistan's inspiring women in New Zealand need is a word of support instead of unwanted criticism.

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Gutting CPLC

THERE is a dark cloud over the future of policing in Pakistan's largest city. A one-of-its-kind initiative born out of a close partnership between the public and private sectors, Karachi's Citizen-Police Liaison Committee has, for 33 years since its inception, been instrumental in helping the province's police force greatly improve its services. Its contributions towards controlling kidnapping and other serious crimes, in a megalopolis that has suffered from extended bouts of violence and festers with organised crime, are no mean feat. A new plan seeking to place the CPLC under the administrative control of the Sindh government threatens to undo it all.

One of the main reasons for CPLC's consistent efficacy over the years has been its ability to function independently under the stewardship of a small group of civic-minded citizens, insulated from interference thanks to their oversight by the politically neutral Governor House. These stewards, drawn mostly from Karachi's business community, have used their clout to ensure that citizens are facilitated

properly and their complaints redressed if police are being difficult. They have also marshalled material resources to help improve police services, especially by introducing technology to maintain crime databases that have greatly helped in fine-tuning policing strategies. The plan to subserve this set-up to an 'Executive Council' operating under the Sindh Home Department's thumb comes as a rapid increase in cases of mobile snatching, armed robbery and auto theft becomes a nuisance for the PPP government. It is feared that one of CPLC's core strengths — compiling crime statistics and analysing data — may actually be gutted as it has the potential to cast a poor light on the provincial government's performance and its control of the police force. This likely heralds the end of an era when the people of Karachi had a proactive role to play in the security of their city. By throttling a shining example of what citizens and state can do by working together, the Sindh government is doing a favour to no one but itself.

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Snooker win

THERE was a poignant moment when Pakistan's teen sensation Ahsan Ramzan overcame his more illustrious compatriot and defending champion Mohammad Asif in the semi-finals of the IBSF World Snooker Championship last week. Flushed with emotion, the 16-year-old broke into tears as he hugged two-time winner Asif, who held Ahsan close like an elder brother. It seemed like the passing of the baton. There is something about winning against one's sports idol and Ahsan's reaction said it all. It was that win that spurred him on in the final against Iran's Amir Sarkhosh, where a stirring comeback from 4-2 down saw him become the second-youngest winner in the history of the world championship with a 6-5 triumph. Ahsan is only the third Pakistani winner at the event, following in the footsteps of the trailblazing Mohammad Yousuf, who won in 1994, and Asif, who captured the title in 2012 and 2019. In this year's championship in Doha, Pakistan had three representatives in the semi-finals, with Mohammad Sajjad losing to Amir in the other last-four clash. In the shorter Asian 6-Reds event, which concludes this week, Asif fell in the semi-finals, assuring a bronze for Pakistan.

All these feats have come with little or no government support or patronage. The Pakistan Billiards and Snooker Federation has been appealing to the minister of

inter-provincial coordination for long for financial assistance. As it stands, it hasn't received an annual grant from the Pakistan Sports Board for the last four years. In fact, finances are so bad that monthly payments to centrally contracted players have been on hold. Moreover, the PBSA says that the government grant for foreign trips by players to represent Pakistan too hasn't been fully paid to it. In view of all this, the achievements of Pakistan's cueists, most notably Ahsan, become all the more special. One wonders how far they can actually go with more support. Right now, Pakistan is on top in the snooker world, but if help doesn't come soon, it might not stay there for long.

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Islamophobia reality

THE UN's decision to recognise March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia must be lauded, especially in the backdrop of global hate crimes and state-sanctioned bias against Muslims. The decision was approved by the UN General Assembly after a resolution was introduced by Pakistan.

Along with calling for the international community to curb Islamophobia, the resolution also condemns bias against followers of other faiths. The sad truth is that for millions of people around the world, Islamophobia is not some nebulous concept, but a toxic everyday reality.

Islamophobia can take several forms, which can include insidious attempts to exclude Muslims from jobs, housing and education on the basis of their faith. Or it can take more violent forms, such as state-sanctioned attacks and pogroms targeting the Muslim community.

All of these manifestations of hate need to be combated vigorously. Islamophobia was given a fillip during the so-called war on terror when the actions of violent actors, claiming to be fighting for the glory of Islam, resulted in ordinary Muslims having to face the consequences. In the post-9/11 era, the repercussions include profiling on the basis of faith, as well as deadly vigilante attacks on Muslims or those who 'look' like Muslims.

Today, anti-Islamic prejudice has taken on new forms, especially at the state level. The decision by the Karnataka High Court in India to uphold the hijab ban in educational institutions comes across as one that has been heavily influenced

by the desire of the state to ‘otherise’ the Muslim community. Sadly, the Indian government wants to dictate what Muslim women can or cannot wear.

However, India’s hijab controversy cannot be seen in isolation. It is part and parcel of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that the chauvinist BJP government has been pushing ever since Narendra Modi took power. Discriminatory citizenship laws, lynching of Muslims on suspicions of consuming or transporting beef, and bans on communal prayers are all part of this sinister anti-Muslim action that the BJP has been pushing. It is exactly this type of hatred that the day against Islamophobia seeks to highlight.

Even elsewhere, decisions to ban or limit the sale of halal meat, as in Europe, along with attempts by far-right parties in the West to demonise Muslims, illustrate the need for a concerted effort to combat Islamophobia. Pakistan has done the right thing by bringing this key issue to the global stage.

In a world riven by hatred, efforts are needed to promote tolerance and pluralism. This includes allowing followers of all faiths to practise their beliefs freely, while Muslim states also have a responsibility to protect their minorities from extremists. Unfortunately, populists and rabble rousers always exploit the schisms in society. To counter their designs, states and conscientious citizens must resist this rising tide of hate by actively working towards a more tolerant world.

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Investing in stocks

THE very fact that just one out of every five investors registered with the Central Depository Company ‘actively’ participates in shares trading underlines the reason why we have a very thin stock market in Pakistan. That only a fraction of such investors are actually involved in selling and buying stocks, driving share volumes and values up and down, on most days of the week, means that the government and regulators need to do a lot more to attract private savings into capital markets. According to CDC data, nearly 278,000 investors are registered with the depository in a country of over 200m people. The number has not grown much in spite of extensive market reforms implemented in the last two decades to attract private savings into stocks. It shows that savers still prefer to invest

their money in government schemes that they see as more secure, or keep their surplus income with banks. This is notwithstanding an average rate of return of 27pc earned by investors on their stock market investments in the last 10 to 15 years. Why is that so? PSX managing director Farrukh Khan tried to explain this the other day, saying that the massive fiscal and regulatory incentives, worth hundreds of billions of rupees, the government has extended to the real estate and construction industry is driving investors away from the shares market to immovable property.

This is true. Indeed, the disproportionately heavier tax incidence in capital markets and the excessive FATF-related regulatory burden, which exposes stock investors to detailed scrutiny by different government departments and makes entry into the shares market more difficult than in real estate, are major reasons for the flow of savings into property. But that is only one factor behind the low public interest in the stock market. People still don't have confidence in the stock market and consider PSX a 'manipulated marketplace', despite improved regulations and transparency. Little has been done to educate middle class savers about the benefits of investing in shares, as opposed to investment in government debt or keeping their savings in banks. Besides, a large number of listed firms have a poor governance and dividend payment history, a major disincentive that keeps smaller investors at bay. While tax and other incentives are crucial to woo investors, the PSX management should increase its supervision of the listed companies and ensure that investors get a reasonable share of their profits.

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Is the game over?

THE political scene in Islamabad changed dramatically yesterday when the opposition allowed electronic media free access to Sindh House to meet dissident PTI parliamentarians. This was an attempt to prove that the legislators had not been abducted, or bribed, as claimed by the government, but had come of their own volition as they feared hostile action by the ruling party in the run-up to the no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Imran Khan in the National Assembly.

These are valid fears: the threat of violence, especially after the recent episode at the Parliament Lodges and the government's veiled warning of physical intimidation, has only grown. But given our unsavoury history of vote-buying and horse-trading, it is difficult to rule out the possibility of the offer of some inducements — cash or a seat in the next election — being made by the opposition to the dissidents. It is a trend that has gained momentum since the 1990s.

More recently, the PTI faced allegations of vote-buying at the time of the formation of the government when south Punjab independents were 'persuaded' by a then loyal Jehangir Tareen to back the party. Meanwhile, parties like the battered MQM were apparently pressured by certain non-political forces to support the PTI.

Concerns of horse-trading aside, it is, prima facie, clear that none of the politicians are being kept there against their free will under the 'protection' of a large posse of the Sindh Police's Special Security Unit.

If the opposition had something to hide, or if these parliamentarians had been 'abducted' as claimed by the government, the media would not have been allowed inside the premises to interview these politicians. Though it is still unclear how many PTI MNAs are currently in Sindh House, the reported figure is in excess of 17 — one politician claimed there were 24 — a significant number that will facilitate the opposition's efforts to oust the PM.

Also read: PM Imran would fight till end but won't offer money, ministries to save govt: ministers

Even though the PTI ministers said the PM intends to fight the no-trust motion, one thing is clear: Imran Khan has lost the confidence of the House, with a large number of PTI MNAs defecting to the opposition camp.

While one can understand why Mr Khan is unprepared to accept defeat at this point, he must not heed recommendations to impose governor's rule in Sindh or call for belligerent tactics. His meeting with the National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser shortly after the appearance of the PTI dissidents on TV screens was uncalled for as it made the speaker even more controversial than he had become after the submission of the notice of the no-confidence motion.

Crossing constitutional boundaries in such a situation or using the state machinery or resorting to violence to prevent lawmakers from voting according to their will can have serious repercussions for our fragile democracy, especially when some elements are already urging non-political forces to intervene to 'save the situation'.

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In limbo

THE decimation of Afghanistan's once-promising media industry by the Taliban has triggered an unforeseen crisis. At least half a dozen Afghan journalists — some of the bravest, most outspoken and most dedicated professionals in the world — were killed within months of the Taliban seizing power, according to media reports. Over roughly the same period, the ultra-orthodox Taliban junta reportedly shut down 300 media outlets and scores of radio stations. Fearing for their lives and the safety of their families, thousands of media workers were forced to go into hiding or flee their homes. Some turned to neighbouring countries for refuge while they sought time to piece their lives back together. A number of such journalists have been residing in Pakistan. They are stuck in a painful limbo as they desperately wait for visas and permission to travel to safer countries. They feel they cannot, on any condition, return to Afghanistan, where their lives will be under constant threat. Even if they avoid a capital sentence on return, they expect to be punished for the 'crime' of leaving in the first place.

The journalists currently residing in Pakistan are being materially supported by several NGOs while they make arrangements for the safety and relocation of their families. However, with the attention of the world now riveted on Ukraine, their plight no longer seems to be a priority. Those who have not been as fortunate as to have had their visa applications processed yet face rapidly dimming hopes for their future. Compounding their misery is the fact that where Pakistani authorities were once quite accommodating in giving visa extensions, this generosity appears to be disappearing rapidly. Combined with messages from sponsors saying they may not be able to provide material support for much longer, this portends a dark future for these beleaguered souls. The emotional trauma of having been forced from their homes and of not knowing what tomorrow will bring has taken a severe toll on many. The Pakistan government

should consider softening its visa rules for stranded Afghans if doing so can help save lives. The foreign missions in Islamabad, too, should not forget their commitment to ensuring the safety of Afghan journalists fleeing violence in their country. It would be a cruel injustice for the world to ignore their plight when they are being persecuted for their work, and to forsake them at a time they most need support.

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An honourable draw

AFTER the drab draw in Rawalpindi, the thrilling finish served up in Karachi was perhaps the advertisement Test cricket needs. It was a draw that felt like a win for Pakistan, who pretty much had their backs to the wall for the first three days of the second Test. This was almost back from the gallows, with Australia seemingly on course for a win, having reduced Pakistan to 21-2, while chasing 506 in the fourth innings of the game. The occasion called for someone to step up and be a hero. Pakistan's biggest hope, and perhaps the best cross-format batter in world cricket at the moment, obliged. Thanks in no small part to Abdullah Shafique and Mohammad Rizwan, Captain Babar Azam dug Pakistan out of trouble, breaking records on the way. He may have fallen four runs short of what would have been a double century but his innings was remarkable. He departed to a standing ovation from the Australian players once he was dismissed after making the highest score by a captain, as well as a Pakistan cricketer, in a fourth innings. His partnership with Abdullah had steadied Pakistan earlier. Another partnership with Rizwan raised hopes of an improbable victory. But conditions after Babar's dismissal were such that even pulling off a draw was no mean feat.

It was uplifting; Pakistan's defiance reinstated the belief that this crop is special. At a baking National Stadium, where their predecessors would in all likelihood have wilted, they showed nerves of steel to deny Australia the chance to take the lead in the three-match series on their first tour to Pakistan since 1998. It means that the final Test in Lahore is now set up nicely. The victorious team will win the series and Pakistan will go into it buoyed by their second innings performance in Karachi where fans celebrated every passing delivery as Babar's men got closer

to a draw. It has raised expectations and a victory in Lahore is surely what Pakistan is looking forward to.

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Approval of KCR

WITH the federal government's long-awaited nod to the Karachi Circular Railway project, the final bureaucratic hurdle has been removed for Karachi citizens who can now expect to see a modernised public transport sector. Buoyed by the success of the commercial launch of the Green Line BRT in January, the PTI-led federal government hopes to redeem itself in Karachi through the execution of the KCR project worth over Rs2bn. This was evident in the statements of the PTI leadership who described the release of funds for the project as evidence of their commitment to the people of Karachi. Federal Planning Minister Asad Umar tweeted that "the people of Karachi would also get the latest and world class travelling service. The PTI has justified its mandate from Karachi in true spirit". Though the timing of the approval may raise a few eyebrows, it should be recalled that both the federation and Sindh had been making gradual efforts to breathe life into the KCR for some time. Prime Minister Imran Khan performed the ground-breaking ceremony in September 2021, while the provincial government has been busy removing encroachments along the KCR route for over a year. The authorities plan to rebuild the 44-km KCR track and supporting infrastructure within three years, before handing these over to a private company for daily operations.

However, it remains to be seen if the current political climate allows for the swift execution of the mass transit project in the megapolis. It is unfortunate that in Pakistan, development schemes are usually the first casualty of political tug of wars, a trait that has especially come to define relations between the PTI-led centre and the Sindh government. This was evident in the recent turf war over three tertiary-care hospitals in Karachi. Irrespective of the outcome of the present stand-off in Islamabad, all stakeholders should protect developing schemes from the political crossfire. The people of Karachi need a viable solution to their mass transit woes — more than just words or schemes on paper.

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Et tu?

WE may now know which way the political winds will blow, but in the well-traversed corridors of power, the more the players change, the more they stay the same. Visuals of a large number of dissident PTI MPs holed up in Sindh House, Islamabad, beamed nationwide late Thursday afternoon, may have given Prime Minister Imran Khan's detractors cause for glee; however, they have also stirred the citizenry's simmering distrust of Pakistan's democratic order.

This latest return of 'lotocracy', marked by a spectacle worthy of a reality TV show, is a depressing reminder of how little regard our elected representatives have for the offices people elect them to. To be clear, refusing to vote based on anything other than the dictates of one's conscience on a matter of national import is a commendable and principled position.

Indeed, it is exactly what one would expect from a parliamentarian tasked with the solemn responsibility of representing the will of the people. Article 63A of the Constitution places no bar on voting against the party line, even if it does prescribe disqualification for doing so. But while a few of the Sindh House dissidents may have developed ideological differences with Mr Khan and may simply want to vote according to their will, the same cannot be said of the entire lot.

Since the late 1980s, outright coercion or incentives, monetary and otherwise, have worked quite well whenever the powers that be have wanted to 'channel' democracy in an expedient direction. No party can claim to have remained immune to the temptation of bolstering its numbers with an MP (or dozen) whose seat can be bought or bartered rather than earned through the election process.

Mr Khan himself is no exception, even though he once said he would never stand for the 'Changa Manga ki siyasat' of the 1990s. Yet, he had no qualms when, soon after the 2018 elections, jet upon jet of independents were flown to his doorstep in questionable circumstances. Likewise, just last year, Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani, backed by the PTI, was miraculously re-elected to his chair in an opposition-dominated House. He had earlier survived a vote of no-confidence in 2019 under very similar circumstances.

The prime minister may be feeling quite stung by his decision to abandon principles for power after seeing his own party members milling about Sindh House. However, his critics would do well not to gloat over this Machiavellian victory. They, too, may find themselves in a similar spot when the wind decides to blow the other way.

Lest anyone forget, there is only one faction that feeds off the steady erosion of the citizenry's faith in the ability of democracy to deliver. It is immaterial to it which party occupies Islamabad as long as the politicians remember not to stray too far from the lines it sets.

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Pharma's complaint

THE Pakistan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, which represents around 300 national drug makers, has threatened to shut down production in less than a week unless the government reverses its decision to reimpose a 17pc sales tax on raw material used to manufacture medicines. Chances are that its threat will fizzle out. But that does not mean that the demand is unjustified. The government imposed the refundable value-added levy on pharmaceutical raw material, or active pharmaceutical ingredients used to produce medicines after a lapse of some years as part of its deal with the IMF. At the time of the passage of the supplementary finance bill, or 'mini budget', through which tax exemptions amounting to Rs350bn for various sectors were revoked in late January, the government had promised the manufacturers to quickly and seamlessly refund the taxes paid on raw material. The purpose of withdrawal of the exemption was to document the industry rather than collect more revenue from it. However, the government hasn't kept its promise to the industry, in spite of several meetings between the finance minister and PPMA representatives to resolve the issue.

The drug producers are right in complaining about the imposition of sales tax at a time when the cost of doing business is constantly rising due to the surging prices of energy and packaging material. Still, shutting down production is not going to help them resolve the problem. They must understand that the cash-strapped government can't afford to take back the decision if it wants to avoid further complications with the IMF, which has already delayed the conclusion of the ongoing seventh review of its funding programme and the transfer of much-

needed dollars because of the energy price relief as well as growing political instability in the country. Both sides will have to find a way out through negotiations, and agree to a mechanism that would ensure the early processing of the industry's sales tax refund claims. Willingness on the part of the FBR — which uses the industry's unpaid tax claims for inflating its revenue collection numbers — to settle the matter is going to be a crucial factor. The government must realise that if the manufacturers are forced to close their factories and create a shortage of medicines in the market, or raise the prices of their products to improve cash flows, it would place a major burden on inflation-stricken, middle class households, further eroding the political capital of the ruling party.

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Losing control

THE ruling party needs a reminder perhaps that there is more than neutrality that divides the beasts from the men. The chaotic scenes witnessed on Friday in Islamabad's Red Zone cannot be excused in any civilised society. Yet, instead of issuing a strong rebuke to the group of supporters that broke down the gates of Sindh House — which included two members of parliament — PTI leaders have prevaricated and even defended the violence that took place.

The information minister's response, in particular, has been quite troubling. Forgetting perhaps that his party heads the state, he has blamed the opposition for somehow provoking the attack. He has also said it may not be possible to stop such incidents from recurring. This is a shameful abdication of responsibility by the government.

The violence these past few days has also not been confined to the physical kind. At least two of the ruling party's leaders have publicly used the worst profanities to castigate MNAs they believe sold out to the opposition. What had so far been a troubling trend confined to social media — where the youth seem to have learnt to think nothing of flinging the most despicable unpleasantries at those they disagree with — has now been brought to our television screens courtesy Shahbaz Gill and Alya Hamza. Their outbursts have snatched away that last fig leaf of decency and given the public a full view of just how vile political discourse has become in these last few years.

It is understandable that PTI's young workers are angry and upset at what they see as a betrayal by some of their leaders. They have a democratic right to protest and make their disappointment known. However, their protests should under no circumstances turn violent and transgress into thuggish behaviour. Any 'lesson' they may want to teach the dissidents ought to be taught only through the ballot box.

Editorial: 'Lotocracy' has stirred the citizenry's simmering distrust of Pakistan's democratic order

The ruling party would do well to remember that human beings created societies based on rules and order to rise above the state of nature beasts thrive in. The injustices PTI perceives to have suffered in these past few weeks do not give it licence to tear up the social contract that binds the Pakistani state together.

Bitter as the prospect of an unceremonious ouster may be, there is nothing extra-constitutional or unlawful about the motion of no-confidence brought against the prime minister. While it is true that the PTI's fears regarding horse-trading may not be misplaced, there is little it can do in this respect at the moment other than finding indisputable proof and initiating suits for dismissal of the floor-crossing MPs. This is, at the end of the day, a purely parliamentary fight that has to be fought under the rules of the Constitution. Saner voices should intervene before it spills further into the streets.

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Turning the corner

IT is news the nation has long hoped to hear on the pandemic front: Covid-19 is close to being eliminated in the country. Planning Minister Asad Umar made the announcement at a press conference on Wednesday and said the government was lifting all coronavirus-related restrictions on weddings, indoor dining, markets, sports activities and religious gatherings. He added, however, that restrictions on those not vaccinated against the virus would continue until 80-85pc of the eligible population was fully vaccinated. The numbers look promising: so far 87pc of the eligible population has received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine and 70pc has been fully vaccinated. While announcing this welcome development, the planning minister sounded an appropriate note of caution. The

lifting of restrictions, he said, “doesn’t mean the pandemic is over” and that the government would be monitoring the prevalence of the disease on a daily basis. That is a pragmatic approach, for the coronavirus, like all RNA viruses, continues to evolve and mutate over time, with some variants proving more contagious than others. Many experts believe Covid-19 will become part of our lives; one more disease against which humankind must get vaccinated. Indeed, even now in many parts of the world, cases have started rising again after a month of decline.

There is thus good reason not to be complacent. It is also time to take stock of the lessons learned during the two years since the pandemic first manifested itself within our borders. There has never before been an occasion that so comprehensively highlighted the importance of investing in the health sector. Given the niggardly amounts dedicated to it by the state, we can only heave a sigh of relief that Covid-19 never quite wreaked the same level of havoc in Pakistan in terms of fatality rates as it did in some neighbouring countries. Several factors contributed to this comparatively better outcome, among them a coordinated and centralised response by the NCOC, especially its relentlessly focused vaccination campaign. Nevertheless, the country’s dilapidated health infrastructure was under enormous stress at times and we must aim for systemic improvement. In 2016, the WHO facilitated an external evaluation that assessed in detail 19 technical areas pertaining to our core capacities in preventing, detecting and responding to health threats, including pandemic preparation. There can be no better impetus than our battle against Covid-19 to finally implement the recommendations that emerged from that exercise.

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Cops as domestic staff

EVEN in a situation where public faith in the police is exceedingly low, recent revelations are an eye-opener. It seems that while hapless Karachi residents run the gauntlet each time they step outside, fearing they could become another statistic in the epidemic of street crime gripping the city, many who should be protecting them have been working as domestic staff in police officers’ homes. It is yet another betrayal of the people’s expectation in the ability of the state to protect their lives and property. Consider that the Karachi police has a sanctioned strength of 60,000 but its currently available force stands at 41,000,

leaving a shortfall of 19,000 personnel. Several officials speaking to this paper a few days ago revealed that cops deputed to provide security to senior officers were actually running errands for them at their residences, even working as chauffeurs, cooks, gardeners, field hands, etc. In the wake of rising public anger and the criticism of the government over the unabated crime wave, the recently appointed city police chief Ghulam Nabi Memon has ordered the withdrawal of personnel deputed to protect police officers and their families.

While this is a move in the right direction, the fact that matters have even come to such a pass is worth considering. There is a dire need for discipline in law enforcement and for fostering a sense of duty to the public. The politicisation of the police has created a culture of entitlement where the coercive power of the state is seen as a means of self-advancement rather than as an essential function of governance to achieve a well-ordered society. When the government interferes in transfers and postings, and thereby makes abundantly clear that senior police personnel are beholden to their political bosses, the people are automatically excluded from this cosy arrangement. The new police chief has his work cut out for him if he wants to reclaim the streets from criminals and give Karachiites a reason to have faith in law enforcement.

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Delay in funding

THE delay in the conclusion of the ongoing seventh review of the \$6bn IMF funding programme for Pakistan may be niggling, but was expected. Many had expressed their doubts about the timely release of the new tranche of nearly \$1bn even before the talks began on March 4. The reasons were obvious. In the first place, a liberal amnesty for tax cheats and the cut in power and petrol prices for four months through June, announced by the politically embattled prime minister towards the end of last month, were not expected to go down well with the IMF because of the potential risks for the budget as well as the fiscal deficit target agreed with the multilateral lender in January. Besides, growing political instability in the wake of the opposition parties' plan to remove the government through a no-confidence motion against the PM means that the IMF staff is not certain if the new dispensation will be ready to 'own' the programme targets and conditions in case the motion is carried by the National Assembly. PPP chairman

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has already hinted at the combined opposition's plans to renegotiate the deal with the lender if they succeed in toppling the present set-up and form a new government.

Although the review under discussion pertains to the end-December programme targets and data, the IMF staff is unwilling to take it to their executive board by the Fund's spring meeting, scheduled to start from April 18. They argue that the Memorandum on Economic and Financial Policies must take into account the future outlook, which should be clear about how the fiscal deficit would look like, and how it would be financed in view of the prevailing uncertain conditions. Essentially, the delay of a month or so in the release of the next loan tranche is unlikely to impact the balance-of-payments position and the foreign exchange reserves if we are able to control our current account deficit this month and the next. Pakistan has massively brought down the February deficit to just \$500m from \$2.5bn in January. However, this will further spoil our reputation as a reliable partner when it comes to meeting our commitments with international partners and implementing tough economic and governance reforms essential for sustainable growth. If we are willing to let politics trump our economic policy, then we should be prepared to face the consequences.

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Child labourers

IT is unfortunate that despite the existence of the relevant laws in all the provinces, the scourge of child labour remains widespread. The sight of children involved in hazardous work in brick kilns, the carpet-weaving industry, auto repair shops and domestic work is, sadly, very common. In this regard, news from Taxila about the registration of four cases against brick kiln owners should be greeted with relief but also caution. On the one hand, it is encouraging to see the authorities taking note of the gross violation of children's right to health, safety and education, and making an attempt to punish the perpetrators. On the other hand, experience and a long list of examples lead to a high degree of scepticism vis-à-vis the state's symbolic gestures, including the registration of cases. Child labour is a multifaceted issue that is complicated by the lack of access to education, absence of the rule of law, poor occupational safety measures and other challenges. Meanwhile, the government's inability to fund, equip and run

child and social protection bureaus or departments also speaks volumes for its indifferent approach. It does not care about the little ones who are forced to give up what should be a carefree phase of their lives.

According to some estimates, Pakistan has the third-highest number of child labourers in the world after Mauritania and Haiti. Experts suggest that there has been a four-fold increase in child labour in the country over the last two decades. However, official figures are missing, since there has been no national survey of the child labour force for over 20 years. Though steps such as the registration of cases against those who abuse the rights of children are important, the law should take the issue to its logical conclusion. Moreover, the government should start collecting data to assess the extent of child labour in the country and activate the relevant provincial and federal departments, while also building the capacity of law enforcers to recognise child abuse when they see it.

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OIC's challenge

AS the foreign ministers of the OIC converge on Islamabad for an important conference, a heavy agenda awaits them. It is an important moment for Pakistan to be hosting this prestigious event in the capital at a time when the world is once again gripped with new global challenges in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While all eyes remain on this conflict and the new power dynamics it is unleashing, the situation in Afghanistan appears to have fallen out of the global news cycle.

What was only a few months ago the focus of the world's attention has now been relegated to the margins of its priorities. Most countries may be able to afford this benign neglect but Pakistan is not among them. As the key stakeholder in Afghanistan, and sharing a long border with it, Pakistan gains the most by reminding the world that the situation in Afghanistan requires to be addressed by the international community.

The OIC meeting this week will be an important platform to reiterate the need for helping Afghanistan recover from decades of conflict. The member nations of the OIC share a responsibility to raise their collective voice and also back their

demands with material and practical steps to improve the situation in Afghanistan.

Hope, however, should be tempered with reality. At the best of times, the OIC has not been an effective body in global affairs. Despite its large membership that includes countries flush with petro dollars, the OIC has appeared to be more of a paper tiger that has been able to achieve precious little on Muslim causes like Kashmir and Palestine. It has struggled to formulate unified positions or take a collective stance on these and other issues that require the Islamic bloc to speak as one.

That said, the OIC can still do a lot by focusing on issues like health, education and poverty that plague most of its member states. This would require concerted efforts by the organisation to take stock of its strengths and weaknesses so that it can make contributions that translate into tangible outcomes. The OIC needs dynamic leadership that can set priorities, mark objectives and deliver results on set timelines. The Islamabad meeting would provide a good opportunity to come up with a message that the OIC, despite all its failings, can still be an effective platform for the Muslims of the world.

Pakistan's success in raising the issue of Islamophobia in the world — evidenced by the UN designation of an anti-Islamophobia day — should set a good example of how Muslim nations can set an agenda if they do it the right way. This week's meeting will therefore be watched closely for signs that the organisation is willing to improve its performance and become a platform that is globally recognised as the voice of the Muslim community.

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Speaker's partisan approach

THERE was no need for the crisis we are now seeing develop overnight. The vote of no-confidence is a straightforward constitutional procedure which can be processed by summoning the National Assembly, tabling the motion and having the members go through the act of voting. The outcome of this voting would determine whether the House continues with its present leader or gets to elect a new one.

Such are the stakes, however, that this fairly linear process is now being twisted and mangled in an attempt to force an outcome of choice.

In this respect, Speaker of the National Assembly Asad Qaiser is playing a role that will not be favourable to his legacy. Not only has he made no attempt to disguise his partisanship, he has actually flaunted it with obvious glee. This has undermined his standing as a moderator, but perhaps more significantly, it has made him interpret the laws and rules governing this procedure with such creative spin that the matter has now gone to the courts.

His act of summoning the session of the National Assembly after the stipulated two weeks, and his explanation for why he has done so, is weak at best. The dates of the OIC conference were set a long time ago and the NA speaker could have easily made alternative arrangements for holding the session if he really wanted to. He could also have called the session a few days before the OIC conference. The fact that he chose not to do so, and that he had to resort to such unconvincing arguments, goes to show that the real reason is more political than he would like to admit.

That said, it is a bit much for the opposition to be demanding that Article 6 be applicable to him for this act. No doubt, the speaker has taken undue leeway with the requirements of the Constitution, but ascribing treason to him smacks of political partisanship in the extreme. Neither does it help the already tense situation. In fact, it exacerbates the tension and proves that the battle lines are now set.

Prime Minister Imran Khan is fuelling this hardening of positions by resorting to harsh language and threatening posturing. In his last public speech, he took matters to a dangerous level when he said that the children of PTI ticket holders aligning with the opposition would face ridicule in schools. Such words can trigger reactions among his supporters that can easily lead to harassment of the children in schools. This is absolutely unacceptable and the prime minister should walk back from such rhetoric before this leads to any unfortunate consequences.

It is sad to see the country's politics once again going into crisis mode as politicians are unable to solve their problems and are yet again forcing the courts to wade into political waters.

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Taliban acceptance

THE Afghan Taliban are veering closer to international acceptance. However, recognition of their hardline regime remains elusive. Fourteen of the 15 members of the UN Security Council last week voted to establish formal ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan — without extending international recognition. The Russians abstained. It is a step closer to recognition though, and means that the international community is prepared to engage with the regime, open their diplomatic missions in Kabul, and do business and trade, while continuing to exhort the hardliners to heed demands to respect human, including women's, rights and ensure an inclusive government. The vote also gives a ray of hope to the 38m Afghans who are facing extreme poverty and a severe lingering drought. The UNSC vote is significant in the sense that the international community has finally woken up to the desperate situation in Afghanistan and has found a practical way of dealing with the Taliban regime, without granting diplomatic recognition to it. Another meeting is scheduled to be held in China next month, to be attended by Afghanistan's immediate neighbours including Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Besides, the Taliban have been invited to attend the OIC foreign ministers' conference in Islamabad as observers. There is little doubt that the issue of granting diplomatic recognition to the hardline rulers will be amongst the top issues on the agenda.

The Afghan Taliban must be elated by the de facto recognition of their government, although they know that they will have to soften their rigid positions on some fundamental issues to achieve full diplomatic recognition. True, the Taliban have been able to restore public order in Afghanistan after a volatile international exit, despite all the misgivings and concerns about their ability to retain control over a country torn apart by decades of fighting. The Taliban have also reopened universities and allowed men and women to resume their education, and at least in some cases, have permitted women to return to work. Still, much more remains to be done. The Taliban have been promising the world on this score, but have done little to address key concerns. They have shown hardly any inclination to form a representative, broad-based inclusive government in Afghanistan — a key demand of the international community — and have, instead, been making counter-arguments to rebuff any suggestion to the effect. The Taliban need to walk the talk to claim diplomatic recognition. Rhetoric alone will not take them anywhere.

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World Water Day

JUST three years... That's the time left before taps in the country probably run dry as Pakistan faces "absolute water scarcity", warn experts. With over 80pc of the population already facing "severe water scarcity" for at least one month a year, by 2040, the UN predicts, critical shortages will affect each and every person in the country. The warning is not new. Neither is the fact that the water level in Tarbela dam has reached dead level well before summer. And yet, there is no sense of urgency or even a half-hearted attempt at salvaging matters. Our own National Water Policy states that the "water crisis is descending like a thunderbolt". It highlights the fast depletion of our groundwater, which is responsible for meeting 70pc of our national and 50pc agricultural needs, according to the World Bank. The extent of reliance on groundwater for water-intensive farming can be assessed by the fact that over 95pc of the total water available is consumed by this sector alone, with 5pc left over for domestic use.

Depleting groundwater resources are also the focus of this year's World Water Day, being observed today. An outdated approach to water conservation and use, obsolete and water-intensive agricultural practices, and unchecked urbanisation have contributed to Pakistan's severe water crisis. Climate change has aggravated the situation as have the poor coping mechanisms of the federal and provincial water management bodies that remain ill-equipped and under-resourced. The fact that, in all these years, these bodies have failed to curb even the high transmission losses of 60pc of surface water speaks volumes for their inefficiency. These circumstances cost the national exchequer at least \$12bn a year, with implications for food and economic security. The government must act fast by, first, realising the gravity of the crisis and making the public aware of it. Secondly, alternatives must be found to water-intensive crops and farmers should be incentivised to accept the shift. Lastly, expert consultation is needed to upgrade and implement the National Water Policy immediately.

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Undermining the ECP

THE PTI government remains adamant in defying the Election Commission of Pakistan at every step. The row over the mode of voting in last year's Senate elections set the government on a collision course with the ECP, and since then, the institutional relationship remains scarred by repeated disagreements.

The government was insistent on the use of electronic voting machines as well as enfranchising overseas Pakistanis for the next general elections, even when the ECP had stated in clear and unambiguous terms that these reforms could not be undertaken without due diligence and within the short time period available. The government rejected these objections and went ahead with issuing an ordinance.

A similar controversy is playing out on the campaign for local bodies elections. The ECP's rules made it clear that the prime minister and cabinet ministers were not allowed to campaign because this would give them undue advantage over those in the opposition as the government functionaries can use state resources in such campaigns.

The government objected to these rules and then proceeded to issue an ordinance allowing these government officials to take part in the campaign. The matter is now in court but the PM and his ministers are openly defying the ECP by holding campaign rallies in these areas. This amounts to a deliberate undermining of the ECP's authority. The ECP has done the right thing by issuing notices to the PM and his ministers and slapping penalties on them, but sadly, it appears that the government could not care less.

Such a brazen disregard of the ECP's rules and deliberate defiance of the fact that the matter awaits a court decision, means that the government has decided to barrel ahead regardless of the consequences. For a government and its PM to adopt such a reckless attitude towards other institutions of the state, and to defy the ECP's orders without a care for the damage incurred, is worrying.

Governments are expected to uphold the sanctity of state institutions and set an example by following the law in both letter and spirit. The last thing a government should be doing is to bully its way through a disagreement.

Unfortunately, this is exactly the approach that the PM has adopted. It may give the government misplaced satisfaction that comes with self-assertion, but it weakens the rule of law and the constitutional structure that binds state institutions into a formal governance framework. The ECP is trying hard to protect its turf, but it should not have to undergo this test. The government should know better. It appears that it does not. The only way out is for the courts to issue a clear and unambiguous order that stops the government from damaging the rule of law and further undermining the writ of the ECP. The country cannot afford this institutional clash.

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D-escalation

AFTER days of brinkmanship, it seems that better sense has prevailed. The PTI's decision to move its much-hyped March 27 rally from the capital's D-Chowk to Parade Ground is a sensible move that, hopefully, will help avoid physical clashes between government and opposition supporters. It is hoped that the opposition too will take up the Islamabad administration's offer to hold its own rally in Sector H-9 or even the F-9 Park, as proposed by the communications minister. It is better that both rallies happen as far apart from each other as possible given the heightened emotions in both camps. It is also important that all leaders consciously acknowledge that the volatility precipitated by their bitter political battle, which is being beamed out around the clock to millions through TV screens and social media, cannot be allowed to combust. Surely, it cannot be in the country's interest to have its people lunging at each other's throats on the streets when the real fight ought to play out within the halls of Parliament House.

Public rallies and political gatherings are the beauty of a functioning democracy. All parties enjoy an equal right to gather the public in order to better present their case to them. However, this right must not be abused to mislead or provoke the people towards any self-serving activity which may otherwise jeopardise law and order and public safety. The political barometer promises much sound and fury on March 27, as both the PTI and the opposition will be looking to get public opinion firmly on their side ahead of the impending vote of no-confidence against the prime minister. The country's political leadership would do well to realise that any irresponsible remark or comment could start a fire that may be difficult to

extinguish. It is important, again, to stress that this is purely a political fight that has to play out in parliament under well-defined rules. The peace and security of the country should not be staked on it.

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Reko Diq deal

IN what is being described as a breakthrough, Barrick Gold Corp has agreed to restart the suspended Reko Diq mine project in Balochistan's Chaghi district, following a settlement with Pakistan on the framework to reconstitute the agreement after 10 years of legal battles and negotiations. The reconstituted agreement allows the Canadian company's Chilean partner, Antofagasta Plc, to exit the project by withdrawing from its claim of \$3.9bn in place of a payment of \$900m. The two companies have won an award of around \$11bn from an international arbitration court against Pakistan's decision denying their joint venture a licence to develop Reko Diq. The government claims that the agreement will help it avoid the penalty, besides bringing in an investment of \$10bn and creating 8,000 new jobs in the province. Under the new arrangement, Barrick gets half the project while Balochistan and federal state-owned firms will each hold 25pc of the remaining half. Barrick will get a mining lease, an exploration licence and surface rights. The project, once it enters the production stage five to six years from now, is billed to be potentially the world's largest gold and copper mine, with deposits capable of producing 200,000 tons of copper and 250,000 ounces of gold a year for more than half a century. The government contends that Pakistan will benefit for "over 100 years from this project and the total worth is estimated to be over \$100bn".

Indeed, the new agreement seems to be an improvement from the past when international investors held 75pc of the project. But questions remain. For instance, the details made public so far don't inform us if the investor plans to set up a refinery at Reko Diq for exporting precious metals or intends to take minerals out of the country in their raw form like the Chinese operator in Saindak. In case Barrick decides to export the metals in their raw form, do we have the capacity for determining the quantity extracted and moved out of the country, and to verify the exact revenue? Will there be a cap on the quantity of minerals to be excavated annually? Will Barrick and Pakistan share the anticipated investment

equally according to their shareholding? If yes, where will \$5bn come from for investment in five to six years? The government owes it to the people of Balochistan as well as the rest of Pakistan to make all the details public for the purpose of transparency.

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Taxing challenge

THE IMF's insistence that the government deliver on an earlier commitment to reform personal income taxes needs to be handled with care. The adverse impact on household incomes due to the government's continued failure to rein in inflation through effective planning and proactive policymaking has of late been worsened by a global commodity price super-cycle which shows no sign of abating.

In such circumstances, to further squeeze households whose budgets are already stretched to breaking point would only add to the public's miseries.

In response to the multifaceted economic challenges thrown up by the Covid-19 pandemic, we should have by now seen broad-based policies aimed at remedying some of the structural issues in Pakistan's economy. The government should have prioritised plugging revenue leakages and meaningfully broadening the tax net to ensure that the taxation system remained equitable.

Instead, it turned to band-aid solutions like Ehsaas handouts and regressive fuel and electricity subsidies to ease inflation pains. Inexplicably, it also allowed tax dodgers ample chances to whiten their black money, first through no-questions-asked investments in real estate and, more recently, by allowing investments in the industrial sector.

The IMF, as part of the seventh review of its Extended Fund Facility, has now demanded that personal income tax rates be increased by the next budget to pad up the government's kitty. It also wants the personal income tax regime reformed so that the government can squeeze as much out of this head as possible. According to well-placed sources who spoke to this paper, the reforms in question are likely to mean the reduction of income tax slabs from 12 to six, which will entail an increase in effective tax rates.

It is unclear at the moment how the government will structure the new slabs and rationalise the applicable taxes on each, but it must ensure that any increase in revenue collection through personal income taxes is done by increasing their progressivity — ie, by making the wealthy contribute a larger share, rather than imposing any additional burden on those already struggling to make ends meet.

Given how perilously things are balanced at the moment in Pakistan's political landscape, there isn't much hope that the government, if it survives, or even its successor, will be in any position to undertake the politically painful, but much-needed reforms that can help successive governments avoid penalising captive taxpayers for their own incompetence in expanding the tax net.

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Mental health

SOUND mental health eludes far too many Pakistanis. Statistics tell us that every fifth person living in this country, including children and adolescents, suffers from a psychological disorder; more than 75pc of them receive no treatment. That bleak scenario has become yet more grim on account of the pandemic-related challenges that have tested everyone's emotional resilience. Data gathered for a scientific research project at the Neuro Computational Lab of Karachi's NED University of Engineering & Technology has found levels of depression, anxiety and stress increasing among the youth in the metropolis. Using 3,000 individuals as test subjects, the study — which looks at 'neurological biomarkers' and is part of an international-level publication on the effects of the global health calamity — records a startling 35pc to 40pc rise in the severity of these conditions among those with mild and moderate psychological issues. Alarmingly, there is also a 28pc increase in the severity of depression, as well as 27pc and 22pc in levels of anxiety and stress, respectively, among individuals suffering from extreme and severe psychological problems.

Pakistan's mental health tragedy is two-fold. Firstly, governments have never attached due importance to this essential aspect of well-being which has profound consequences for national advancement — even if we look at the issue solely through the utilitarian lens of lost productivity. There is no national mental health policy and while some provinces have mental health legislation, it is barely implemented; legislation to decriminalise attempted suicide was recently

deferred; and it was only last year the Supreme Court ruled that condemned prisoners with severe mental illness would be exempt from the execution of death sentences against them. Secondly, the stigma attached to mental illness compounds the paucity of resources available for treatment and support of those in need and isolates them further. Amid the exceptional circumstances wrought by the pandemic from 2020 onward, that isolation was further deepened. Many people suffered loss of income in a contracting economy; young people had to cope, or were unable to cope, with a radically changed education scenario; many women and children were forced into lockdown with abusive family members, etc. It is by now well-documented that cases of domestic violence skyrocketed during the pandemic as earlier avenues of support or relief (such as going to work/school/college) became unavailable to victims.

Worldwide, the psychological impact of the pandemic is being recognised. Given how far behind Pakistan has been in terms of investing in mental health, this is an opportunity for the country to change direction and systematically address the shortcomings in the sector. We need a holistic and practical approach that brings mental healthcare to the vast population; specialist services at the tertiary level alone are not enough to cater to the need. Moreover, there must be an unvarnished conversation around mental health in the country to clear the superstitions and misconceptions that surround it.

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World TB Day

NE may well mistake it for some other respiratory illness — even Covid-19 at a time when the pandemic still persists. But coughing, having difficulty in breathing, chest pain, weakness and fever are also the main symptoms of tuberculosis, which is spread through the air when an infected person coughs, sneezes or spits in close proximity. A person can become ill after inhaling only a few droplets. However, though people with strong immune systems can be infected not all fall ill. Those with weak immunity, comorbidities such as diabetes, and smokers are at higher risk. World TB Day that is observed every year on this day is an apt reminder of a ‘silent killer’ that continues to take thousands of lives across the globe, including in Pakistan. It is also described as a disease of the

poor because it is more prevalent in countries where population densities are high and working and living conditions are subpar.

Tuberculosis is now considered the second most lethal infectious disease in the world after Covid-19. However, TB is both preventable and treatable. In 2020, some 1.5m people died of this disease globally. Two-thirds of these deaths were reported from eight countries — most of them in India, followed by China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and South Africa. As many as 600,000 cases are reported in Pakistan every year, out of which at least 27,000 are said to be of the multidrug-resistant variety. About 44,000 people die of the infection. The rise of MDR TB in Pakistan is a reflection of bad medical practices, poor disease surveillance and the state's negligence towards the need for greater access to healthcare facilities — factors that mar the performance of the health sector. The prevalence of MDR TB also exposes the inadequate investment in the National TB Control Programme which has been unable to curb TB's spread. The authorities need to invest politically, financially and administratively in efforts to eradicate a disease that continues to cut short a number of lives.

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Gang war murders

THE bodies are piling up yet again, which inevitably raises the question: are the infamous gangs of Lyari coming back to life? The Karachi locality had until some years ago become a byword for lawlessness where rival gangs involved in extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and various other criminal rackets ruled the streets and terrorised people, both in the neighbourhood and beyond. Turf wars between them could explode into deadly confrontations at a moment's notice; numerous innocents lost their lives in the process, not to mention the criminals themselves. Among the most horrific episodes of gang-on-gang violence took place in March 2013, when Arshad Pappu, one of Lyari's main ringleaders, his brother and an acquaintance were tortured to death allegedly by members of a rival gang led by notorious underworld figure Uzair Baloch. The suspected perpetrators were arrested and put on trial, which is still ongoing. On Tuesday, two of the accused, including a former SHO, were gunned down in broad daylight in Karachi's Saddar area while returning from a court hearing.

What has rekindled fears of Lyari's return to the bad old days is that less than three months ago, on Dec 31, an identical hit was carried out against another accused, a former police inspector named Javed Baloch, while he too was returning from a court hearing. A friend accompanying him was also shot dead. Investigators believe the murders to be revenge killings by members of the Arshad Pappu gang. Whatever the truth of the matter, law-enforcement must mop up whatever remnants have resurfaced of the vicious outlaws that once held Lyari hostage. But this is far more than a law-and-order issue. Behind the proliferation of the gangs in the area — once a hub of progressive movements and resistance to military dictatorships — is a story closely interwoven with national and local politics. The fact is, an entire generation of Lyari's youth was pushed into criminality to serve a cynical agenda. There must be no repeat of that terrible strategy.

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OIC declaration

THE Islamabad Declaration adopted at the conclusion of the OIC's Council of Foreign Ministers appears to be a comprehensive document, addressing around 70 points. These cover disputes affecting the Muslim world as well as conflicts in non-Muslim areas, such as the Ukraine-Russia war. Palestine, Kashmir and Afghanistan all feature prominently in the document, as does the plight of the Rohingya and the attempts to counter Islamophobia.

But as always, the key challenge before the multilateral Muslim bloc remains translating these noble aims into achievable goals, and more importantly, overcoming internal divisions.

The declaration reiterated the "centrality of the question of Palestine" while expressing "unwavering solidarity with the people of Jammu and Kashmir" as they seek "their inalienable right to self-determination". The document also expressed "grave concern" over the incident earlier this month in which an Indian missile violated Pakistani airspace.

With regard to the dire humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, a trust fund has been launched by the OIC to help support the people of that country. Indeed, Afghanistan has been a victim of geopolitical intrigue and superpower politics for

the last four decades, which has left its infrastructure in ruins. While it has primarily been non-Muslim powers that have played a central role in Afghanistan's destruction — though Afghan power players cannot be absolved of blame — the Muslim world has a responsibility to support the Afghan people in their hour of need. Pakistan has been hosting millions of Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion, and many of the Muslim states with deep pockets can play a bigger role in ensuring that the people of Afghanistan get the financial and humanitarian help they need.

While such meetings have an important role to play where discussion of the Muslim world's problems is concerned, there has long been legitimate criticism of the OIC's lack of delivery and unity. True, OIC declarations are well-meaning and give the appearance of a united voice emerging from the Muslim bloc, but the reality is more sobering.

For example, at around the same time that officials waxed eloquent about the Palestine cause in Islamabad, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was hosting the Israeli prime minister and the UAE's top royal in his country. Moreover, a number of Muslim states have taken the lead in establishing ties with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. Also, while the Islamabad Declaration contains solemn pledges to support the oppressed people of Kashmir, in reality very little is done by the majority of Muslim states to help end the subjugation of Kashmir. For instance, the UAE has sought to make investments in the disputed region, to the benefit of New Delhi. These discrepancies between the OIC member states' words and actions need to be addressed if the multilateral body is to become an effective voice for the Muslim world and not merely a talk shop that issues verbose statements.

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Much ado

THE combined opposition's joint charter on the way forward, ambitiously titled Quwwat-i-Akhuwat-i-Awam and released on the occasion of Pakistan Day, can best be described as a tragicomic attempt at a bold reimagining of the future. One wonders why the old hands of Pakistan's politics felt a need to repackage so many of their past campaign promises as some great breakthrough that they had collectively achieved. With the prime minister's ouster almost within grasp,

perhaps they felt they deserved a pat on the back. Otherwise, there has been little in the events of the past few weeks to justify their premising of our future on such grand promises, especially when the citizenry has witnessed just how messy, even dirty, the political process really is. The title of the charter, which translates roughly to ‘the might of the unity of the people’, is particularly ironic: there is nothing in the document itself about how a new political set-up will bridge the bitter divides in our highly polarised citizenry.

The charter promises the elimination of terrorism “through effective implementation of the National Security Policy”. It also promises “an effective, transparent and just law for across-the-board accountability to tackle financial corruption”. No Pakistani can say they have not heard this many times before. Other vague promises include an “urgent” policy to ensure relief for the poor, labourers and farmers, and “concrete steps” — whatever these may be — to recover missing persons. There are commitments to the devolution of power to local governments and politicians’ usual lip service to “guaranteed” civil, social, gender and minority rights. The charter boldly claims that Pakistan will be turned into a state where all administrative institutions will be subservient to the elected executive and parliament. A tall order, given the success of the opposition’s no-confidence move remains conditional on the same institutions’ implicit endorsement of it through their continuing ‘neutrality’. Much of the remaining charter pertains to things that might more simply be described as: ‘the government will do its job’. It is unfortunate that the opposition parties, which now seem sufficiently confident of their victory, spent their energies on revisiting old vows rather than a roadmap to dispel the uncertainty that is bound to follow if the government is sent packing. Surely, its collective wisdom cannot be so bereft of ideas that this charter was the best it could do. There’s no wine in this new bottle — only vinegar.

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PTI’s accounts

THE scrutiny of the ruling PTI’s financial accounts and funding sources continues to bring troubling new facts to light. The party recently wrote to the Election Commission of Pakistan to ‘disown’ nearly a dozen bank accounts that had been opened by some of its senior-most party leaders, many of whom have served as public office-bearers in the incumbent regime.

In its response to questions put forth by the ECP, the party tried to evade accountability by claiming it was previously unaware of the accounts' ownership. However, the claim that these accounts were being operated without the knowledge of the party's finance department by individuals who lacked any authority to do so beggars belief — especially since the party says it did itself transfer funds into these accounts at some point.

Even if we give the party the benefit of doubt, this latest revelation presents serious questions regarding the PTI's oversight and control over the donations and contributions made by its supporters. Keeping aside the question of who is providing the money, it is surely not contestable that these funds are meant for the party's operational use? Why, then, are such large sums lying in accounts that it says it has no control over? This is as much a question for the party's managers to ponder as it is for the general public. The PTI already has much explaining to do regarding funding allegedly provided by foreign nationals and companies, not to mention its under-reported financial statements and unexplained large transactions.

The ECP, too, needs to pick up pace and deliver a verdict on its scrutiny of the PTI's accounts soon. For years, the party dragged its feet in providing records and answering questions, which prolonged the review of its finances. However, the ECP, too, seems understaffed and therefore incapable of handling an investigation of such breadth and complexity. It is clear that it needs more people and resources to monitor not just the PTI's, but every political party's records.

It is quite unfortunate that the commission seems to have no coordination or access to the country's tax authorities. Given that these latest revelations point to individual lawmakers owning and operating bank accounts with significant sums in them, there ought to have been some mechanism to alert the commission about their irregular financial dealings. The yearly wealth declaration that the ECP asks all lawmakers for is largely symbolic — no one has ever been issued a notice on its basis.

Perhaps it is now time to reform election laws so that both lawmakers and their parties are held liable for providing detailed financial statements on a regular basis. Political parties are, after all, public entities whose activities affect the public good. The people have a right to demand transparency in their internal dealings, especially if the funds are coming from public sources.

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Housing shortage

THE recent pickup in the disbursement of subsidised bank loans among first-time homeowners for the construction or purchase of a home is a positive development given the growing housing shortage in the country and the commercial banks' aversion to expanding this segment of the economy in order to avoid potential default risks. Loan disbursement for low-cost housing jumped by a whopping 46pc in the three months to February, according to State Bank data. Yet the disbursement of loans for low- to middle-income households under the Mera Pakistan Mera Ghar scheme, launched in October 2020, lags behind the actual demand should we take into consideration the gaping difference between the size of financing approved and disbursed by the banks so far. SBP governor Reza Baqir recently claimed that the banks have approved financing of Rs157bn under the MPMG and disbursed Rs56bn in the first eight months of the present fiscal year. That is a significant improvement from the past; yet, at the same time, it underscores the large gap between the demand for and supply of affordable housing units. This shows that the creators of the MPMG, which envisages the construction of 5m units, have made a cardinal mistake while crafting the scheme: they failed to take measures to increase the supply of affordable housing units in accordance with the anticipated appetite for home loans that the subsidised bank financing has unleashed. Private investors are reluctant to put their money into low-cost housing projects because of their commercial unviability due to skyrocketing land and construction costs.

The government is trying to make up for the lack of private investment in this segment by launching the construction of several thousand units but can do only so much. It means that housing for low-income groups, such as school teachers, nurses, low-cadre government employees, small business owners, etc remains a pipe dream. They are also those whose requests for housing loans are not considered by the banks as they are unable to prove their loan-worthiness due to lack of a credible credit history. The affordable housing programme could have been a game changer for the economy and low-income groups if the focus of the tax amnesty scheme and incentives were those people who cannot imagine owning a home. It could still turn things around if the government is somehow

able to make low-cost housing commercially viable for private investors by sharing state land as its equity in such projects.

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No education for girls

THE Afghan Taliban's announcement of the indefinite closure of girls' schools just two days after their education ministry released a congratulatory video is both disappointing and deeply concerning. On March 21, the Taliban said they would lift a seven-month-old de facto ban on girls' education from Class 6 onwards and reopen schools on the first day of Afghanistan's new academic year. Two days later, the Taliban backtracked, saying they were putting in place policies compliant with the "principles of Islamic law and Afghan culture". One report said the education ministry was facing a shortage of teachers, following the exodus of thousands of Afghans, many among them trained teachers, after the Taliban's triumphant march into Kabul last August. A senior Taliban figure said the schools would be reopened after a "standardised uniform" for girls was introduced that reflected the Afghan culture. But there was also a report suggesting deep divisions within the Taliban's Supreme Council of Jurisprudence on whether or not girls could be permitted to seek education beyond Class 6. This smacks of contradiction as well as confusion.

The Taliban allowed public universities to reopen last month, holding out the promise that girls' schools would restart too. Their leadership held meetings and visited hospitals to speak to women doctors and nurses, encouraging them to return to work and continue to serve. Yet, they are still grappling with the issue of girls' education and women's participation in public life. Looking deeper into the Taliban mindset, it is abundantly clear that their leadership is still struggling to embrace the idea of women's role in Afghan society. Little do they realise that no country can progress without the active participation of its women in building society, not least in Afghanistan where they constitute 48pc of the total population. Afghanistan has already seen a brain-drain and there is a shortage of skilled and trained manpower. One hopes that saner elements within the Taliban leadership prevail and the decision to close down girls' schools is rescinded.'

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Australia's triumph

IN the end, the better side, the one that played with attacking intent and tried to force a result, won. After the series-deciding third Test against Australia in Lahore, Pakistan captain Babar Azam reflected that his team had dominated the first two Tests in Rawalpindi and Karachi, which ended in contrasting stalemates. That was somewhat misleading, and probably came in the heat of the grilling witnessed after a final day at Gaddafi Stadium where Pakistan went in with hopes but were overwhelmed by the Australians. The latter's win in Lahore was a fitting result of their efforts. With 278 more runs required to overhaul the target of 351, and with all wickets in hand, Pakistan were arguably in a position of strength. Australian captain Pat Cummins' decision to declare their second innings the previous day to force a result had been a bold one. Had Pakistan won, the decision would have seemed bizarre. But teams like Australia have the conviction and mental strength to back their decisions with actions and to create match-winning situations and capitalise on them. They might have not been able to do that in Karachi, where Babar's majestic innings forced an epic draw, but there was no denying them in Lahore where they won by 115 runs.

What will hurt Pakistan more is the fact that the pitches in all three venues had been curated keeping in mind their own strengths. After the boring draw in the opening Test in Rawalpindi, PCB chief Ramiz Raja had been keen to stress that Pakistan needed to use their home advantage while making pitches. It didn't matter in the end though and the fickle nature of professional sport will mean there will be questions asked of players who failed to fire. Babar was quick to point out that those who didn't perform have served Pakistan well in the past. In the fast-moving world of sports, that doesn't count for much but the limited-overs series which starts from Monday offers Pakistan a chance to bounce back.

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Economic policy in turmoil

THE ongoing political turmoil in Pakistan has meant unsettling times for the government and its economic policymaking. The turbulence sparked by the opposition parties' latest attempt to remove the prime minister through a vote of

no-confidence has focused the ruling party's energies on saving its leader. In doing so, it is losing sight of the economic ball.

In the last couple of years, we have seen Prime Minister Imran Khan regularly attempting to pacify angry, inflation-stricken voters to snatch back lost political ground through some questionable economic decisions. Consequently, we are almost back to the point where the previous PML-N set-up had left the economy. State Bank data shows that Pakistan's official liquid foreign reserves are now below \$15bn — in spite of the \$2bn received through the purchase of debt through Sukuk and from the IMF.

Growing debt payments and a rising import bill have bled the debt-based dollar reserves in less than eight months from a recent peak of over \$20bn in August amid reports that the IMF is not satisfied with the government's decision to give another blanket tax amnesty — the third under its rule — along with a four-month freeze on petrol and electricity prices last month. The IMF seems reluctant to approve the seventh review of its \$6bn funding programme until the future of the PTI set-up becomes clear. On top of that, the exchange rate is deteriorating, with the rupee closing at nearly 182 to a dollar in the inter-bank market on Friday.

Indeed, the external sector position can still be salvaged with a little effort. But the question is: will mounting political instability allow the government to concentrate on the economy in the next few weeks or perhaps months? With a 47pc increase in imports compared to 26pc growth in exports, which has expanded the trade imbalance by 82pc to around \$32bn year-over-year and the current account deficit to \$12bn in the first eight months of the present fiscal to February, matters appear to be headed south. The reasons for the economic, especially external account, troubles are quite obvious. In spite of the tall claims it has made in the last few years, the government has utterly failed to address structural bottlenecks to increase productivity and put in place long-term policies and incentives needed to boost the country's merchandise exports for reducing reliance on foreign debt.

In comparison, we see India having pulled off what they are touting as a 'made in India blockbuster' by growing their merchandise exports to over \$400bn between April 2021 and March 2022. It is time we too learnt from our mistakes and diverted our energies to fix our export sector if we want to end an endless cycle of boom and bust. If we don't, all the hardships suffered over the last three and a half years — and earlier — would have been for nothing.

Houthi attacks

OVER the course of time, as the brutal Yemen war has ground on, the Houthi rebel movement has been staging incredibly complex attacks against its Saudi and Emirati adversaries. Friday's series of raids — including one targeting a facility of Saudi state petrochemical giant Aramco in the commercial capital of Jeddah — sends the message that unless the war is wound up soon, the attacks are bound to get more brazen, striking deeper within the kingdom and the UAE. The attacks and counter-attacks do not bode well for regional peace and global energy prices, especially in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. What is equally troubling is the fact that as the Saudi-led coalition pounds the Houthis, the miseries of the Yemeni people increase. Earlier, the Houthis would mostly hit border areas with drones and missiles. But these attacks have now become more sophisticated, indicating that the Iran-backed movement has the capability to seriously disrupt the region's energy trade, as well as cause major harm to Saudi Arabia and the UAE's image as islands of peace in a sea of turbulence. The Jeddah attack came at a time when the port city is hosting a Formula 1 racing event, while in January the Houthis struck the UAE as Expo 2020 was underway, and the Israeli president was in town.

For the Western-backed Saudi coalition, the Yemen war was supposed to be a relatively simple operation; the ragtag Houthis were to be ejected from the capital Sana'a and the pro-Saudi government restored in a matter of days or weeks. But the script did not play out like this, with Yemen transforming into a quagmire for the Saudis and their allies, and the Houthis largely holding their positions. Caught in the middle have been the Yemeni people, starved, killed and exposed to disease as their country collapsed. It is crucial then that, seven years after the beginning of this fruitless war, all actors involved sue for peace instead of continuing hostilities. The Saudis had a few days ago called for peace talks involving all Yemeni parties, including the Houthis, in Riyadh. However, the pro-Iran group said it would only talk in a 'neutral' venue. This opportunity must be seized and perhaps Oman or some other state acceptable to both sides can be used as a base for talks to end this brutal conflict, and help bring peace to Yemen and the region.

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Rohingya genocide

THE US decision to formally recognise the brutalities inflicted on the Burmese Rohingya as genocide is a small but welcome step towards getting justice for what has been described by the UN as the most persecuted minority in the world. The brutalisation of this community has been a tragedy of unimaginable proportions. Survivors have recounted that, amidst the worst of it, they were pulled from their homes, mutilated, raped and forced to witness children thrown into fires — the inhuman violence begotten by hateful propaganda painting the Rohingya as sub-human ‘intruders’ from Bangladesh. The violence was then normalised through victim-blaming commentary shared widely by bigots on social media, especially Facebook, which did little to stem its spread. Yet, both the Myanmar military and the government denied the atrocities committed against a largely defenceless people and refused accountability. Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, then the leader of Myanmar, even travelled to The Hague to rebut charges of genocide brought against her country in a case still ongoing at the UN’s top court.

So insatiable was the fire of hate unleashed in 2017 that it eventually burnt even those who had refused to condemn it. When the Myanmar military toppled Aung San Suu Kyi’s government in 2021 through a coup d’état, it took a leaf from its Rohingya playbook to violently subjugate critics and dissidents engaged in peaceful protests. The junta has since killed more than 1,500 citizens for civil disobedience. This worrying state of affairs is mentioned in the US statement on Myanmar’s 2017 genocide, which warns that the Myanmar military may continue deploying the same tactics against anyone it sees as undermining its rule. It is time now for the global community to act. While the UN’s highest court hears a case pertaining to the genocide, the world must hold Myanmar authorities accountable for their crimes against humanity. Myanmar’s elite must be sanctioned in the strongest possible ways to warn imitators that severe brutalities will be met with severe penalties.

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The captain's gambit

IT seems that the last wisps of the political fog that has clouded the federal capital since March 8 finally dissipated yesterday evening at Islamabad's Parade Ground. For the first time this month, Prime Minister Imran Khan sounded like a man certain of the fate that awaits him in the days to come. Between the lines of his long-running speech were the clearest indications yet that he has come to terms with the likely outcome of the impending no-confidence vote and is now moving on to laying the ground for the politics of what comes next.

Much of what he said would have been very familiar to the quite significant number of gathered supporters, some of whom braved hours of gridlocked traffic to hear him speak. Indeed, he truly tested the patience of those who had been eagerly waiting for the grand reveal of his promised trump card. Instead, he took his time to set the direction of his party's future narrative by carefully recounting everything his government counts as an achievement thus far — such as its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ehsaas programmes, fuel subsidies and so on. It was well over an hour before he got to the more extraordinary part of his address.

Brandishing a weathered-looking document allegedly containing “written proof”, the prime minister suggested that his government was the target of an international conspiracy. Though he insisted that he did not want to get ‘swept up’ in emotions and ‘over-speak’ on the matter — which, he said, “might affect Pakistan's foreign policy” — the prime minister suggested that he faced the same circumstances Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did before his unceremonious removal by military dictator Ziaul Haq. He indirectly suggested that Mr Bhutto had, due to his insistence on an independent foreign policy, fallen prey to an international conspiracy that was abetted by the security establishment, implying that he too may meet the same fate.

All this could well be correct, as both foreign powers and security establishments have played a role in the making and breaking of governments, with the incumbent government being no exception. However, we will never know what the truth of the matter is unless the prime minister shares his evidence publicly. One also wonders just what Mr Khan believes he has done to defy world powers such that they think it important to remove him from office while war rages in Europe and the global economy strains under unprecedented inflation. All said,

this was the speech of a man with both eyes on the future — someone who knows his time is up and wishes to go down as a political martyr. Much of what he said will be used to whip up his electorate in case he takes up the mantle as opposition leader. It seems a dangerous game is about to get underway.

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Education crisis

PAKISTAN'S educational crisis is rooted in inequality. Nowhere are national socioeconomic and gender fault lines more apparent than in the education sector. In this regard, a recent report by the Idara-i-Taleem-o-Agahi, titled *Measuring the Impact of Covid-19 on Education in Pakistan*, confirms what education experts have been saying all along: “girls experienced greater learning losses than boys during the Covid-19 school closure across nearly all competencies and classes”. Even before the pandemic, Pakistan was among the 10 countries identified by Unesco where girls from poverty-stricken homes spent less than two years of their life in school. Several surveys in the past two years have highlighted the drastic increase in student drop-out rates and learning losses. However, this new report provides significant insights into how almost all vulnerabilities in the education sector — poverty, unequal access to school, socioeconomic barriers — hamper girls' education. According to the report, school enrolment for boys in the age groups of 3-5 and 6-16 years was 58pc and 61pc. In contrast, girls' enrolment for the same age groups was 42pc and 39pc. Similarly, the report states that more girls dropped out of school during the pandemic than boys.

Secondly, girls who remained in school faced larger learning losses as compared to their male classmates, even if they were outperforming them before the pandemic. “This is the case across most competencies — mathematics, Urdu literacy and English,” asserts the report. For example, in 2019, 28pc girls as compared to 25pc boys could read Urdu words in Class 1. However, in 2021, only 16pc of girls were able read Urdu words as compared to 19pc of boys. Though learning losses are significant for both, girls appear to be more affected. These and other figures in the report reflect the gender imbalance in society. Many sections of society place a premium on boys' education, while girls are expected to take up domestic responsibilities. In families where affordability is an

issue, a girl's education is deemed less important than that of her brothers. In the same vein, more boys have access to digital means of study than girls, naturally affecting the continuity of their studies. The task of reforming education in Pakistan, then, is a difficult but not impossible one. As the report recommends, the government can start investing in girls' education by ensuring that at least 50pc of the recipients of education support schemes are girls. Leaving girls behind is no longer an option.

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Tyranny of the minority

IT now seems that the fate of yet another government will be written by parties with few seats, fewer principles and fewer yet scruples about cynically capitalising on their offices for personal gain. Yesterday evening, the PML-Q, with its five seats in the National Assembly, successfully forced Prime Minister Imran Khan to capitulate and nominate Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi as the new chief minister of Punjab.

With the vote of no-confidence, like Damocles' proverbial sword, inching ever closer to the government's neck, the PML-Q thought it opportune to demand all of Punjab as its pound of flesh for the handful of votes it should, as an erstwhile ally, have already been casting in the prime minister's favour. It must have been painful for the prime minister to relinquish Pakistan's most populous province, but his Faustian bargain may well be for naught. Soon after he was done compromising with one ally, another, the BAP, announced it would be voting against him.

A day earlier, Shahzain Bugti of the Jamhoori Watan Party, serving as special assistant for reconciliation and harmony in Balochistan, had announced his untimely defection. Meanwhile, the MQM is still waiting in the wings, likely sizing up what's left of the political pie.

As intrigue rocked the government all of this outgoing month, its so-called allies prevaricated till the end, amply demonstrating that there is little that politically defines them apart from narrow self-interest and petty power grabs. Instead of making their decisions based on political principles, the leaders of the PML-Q and MQM made no attempt to even try and disguise the fact that their allegiance

was available to whoever cut them a better deal. Though it is understood that all four of these parties' strings are usually held firmly in the hands of anti-democratic forces, their self-serving brand of politics has become all the more evident at a time when all and sundry agree the puppet masters are taking a well-deserved break for some non-neutral neutrality. That is why, even though the opposition may be feeling a considerable measure of satisfaction at seeing the PTI humbled by the same forces they long accused of riding to victory, it is time all major parties across the aisle start thinking about how these 'spoiler parties' are to be politically dealt with in the long term.

Indeed, most of them — including the PML-N before it evolved into its current state — were created and propped up by undemocratic forces for their nuisance value, which greatly helped keep a check on the ambitions of political parties who got too big for their boots. The parties which seek to genuinely represent the people will find it wise, perhaps sometime in the not too distant future, to seize this outsized power back through democratically legislated means arrived at through broad consensus.

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Witness intimidation

ONE of the most infamous cases of sexual harassment has come to a fitting conclusion. On Friday, a sessions court in Islamabad sentenced five men to life imprisonment for holding a couple hostage at gunpoint, physically assaulting them, forcing them to strip and carry out sexual acts on camera. After they had committed this depravity, the gang had then used the video to blackmail the couple for money. When the video surfaced on social media in July last year, it went viral and sparked outrage across the country. Even the prime minister weighed in, directing the police to ensure that the men were brought to justice. The main accused was arrested within a day, and several others were apprehended soon after. The charges against the gang, based on the victims' statements and bolstered by video evidence, made for what seemed to be a watertight case. And then, Pakistan's social dynamics kicked in, and it all began to fall apart.

Early this year, the prosecution told the sessions court judge that the victims' phones were switched off. Then, in January, the female victim retracted her

statement against the accused and told the trial court that she did not wish to pursue the case. The next day, however, Parliamentary Secretary for Law Maleeka Bokhari announced that the state would pursue the case regardless of the recent developments. “Irrefutable video and forensic evidence on record; anyone harassing and stripping a woman must face full force of the law,” she tweeted. The government took the correct approach; clearly, attempts were being made to intimidate the witnesses and pervert the course of justice — a crime in itself. Sadly, this is far from uncommon in this country. Powerful groups bribe, threaten and blackmail witnesses to recant their testimony, which often weakens the case and enables perpetrators to go scot-free. These ploys are even more frequent in cases involving female victims, as in the case at hand, when the stigma attached to sexual crimes already inhibits women from coming forward to file charges. Until the criminal justice system can inspire trust in victims and instil in them the confidence that their tormentors will be brought to book, women will remain vulnerable to such pressure tactics. Even otherwise, witness protection programmes must be strengthened in the country. In the present case, the video evidence was compelling enough to bring about a conviction; that is not always the case.

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Depths of darkness

CONSIDERING that countless coal miners never return from what can aptly be termed as black holes in the earth, the rescue of the three who did is nothing short of a miracle. It took four teams of the provincial mining department five days to extricate the miners who were trapped 400m below the surface of the earth in a mine in Balochistan’s Harnai district. The accumulation of methane gas in the mine had led to an explosion on March 22, closing off the only exit for the six people working there. Three of the men were rescued within 24 hours while the rest remained trapped. Sadly, such accidents have become a regular occurrence in the coal-mining industry, with more than 70pc of mines being operated illegally by private contractors, who are least concerned about safety features, such as emergency exits, for the miners. According to news reports, a similar accident had claimed several lives in 2019, for which the mine owner was tried in court. However, he was acquitted and apparently resumed his operations.

In this case, the provincial mining department's truly heroic efforts to save the miners must be lauded. But what is the government doing to regulate the mining sector and hold negligent mine owners accountable, especially for the lives lost under their watch? Just a fortnight or so ago, three coal miners died in the same fashion in Quetta's Sorange coalfield. According to officials of the Pakistan Central Mines Labour Federation, more than 440 miners have perished in Balochistan alone over the past few years. The HRCP, too, last year expressed serious concerns about the inhumane conditions prevalent in coal mines in Balochistan and the continued exploitation of the hapless workers. In this regard, Sindh's decision to provide complete health coverage for men working in coal mines in Lakhra and Jhimpir is encouraging and an example for other provinces to follow. The Balochistan authorities especially should punish irresponsible mine owners and regularise and modernise the mining sector to make it safer for the workers.

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Back to obscurity

AFTER an abrupt exit from office, Usman Buzdar is likely to fade into oblivion, three and a half years after Prime Minister Imran Khan handpicked him to head the PTI government in the country's politically most important province of Punjab.

After backing him every step of the way — at the cost of alienating many PTI lawmakers — the embattled PM has been forced to dump Mr Buzdar as he tries to save his government in Punjab and Islamabad in the face of the fierce political challenge mounted against him by the opposition as well as PTI rebels. Will the 'sacrifice' by the man from Barthi, a remote town on the outskirts of Taunsa Sharif along Punjab's border with Balochistan, do the trick? We will find out soon.

Mr Khan's stated reasons for choosing the then politically unknown Usman Buzdar were simple: he came from one of Punjab's most backward areas and was the only member of the provincial assembly who didn't have electricity, clean drinking water or a hospital in his area. Thus, he was supposed to have a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by the residents of these neglected areas, and to work more effectively for their uplift. At least that was the explanation given by the PTI chief to his party members who preferred a strong administrator in the image of Mr Buzdar's energetic predecessor Shehbaz Sharif to counter the

rival PML-N. Yet many suspected, with reason, that Mr Khan had selected the soft-spoken Mr Buzdar to avert factional fights within the PTI and also to control Punjab remotely from the centre since the outgoing chief minister lacked political clout in the party he joined just before the 2018 elections and had no one to fall back on but his leader.

His critics and the media have mostly painted Mr Buzdar — who ‘survived’ many speculations, mostly originating from within his own party, of his early departure from office — as an inept and ineffective administrator. Indeed, the criticism is not totally out of place, as much of his time in power was spent in learning the ropes. Yet, for a small-town politician constrained by his total inexperience in the affairs of the state, a lack of connections in the Punjab bureaucracy, and deep economic turmoil, he leaves behind a mixed legacy as did many of his predecessors. He may not have had a number of mega infrastructure projects to his credit, but he must be praised for expanding health insurance coverage to the entire population of the province, ring-fencing development funds for south Punjab and undertaking certain long overdue soft reforms in the health and school education sectors. His sins of omission and commission as provincial chief executive aside, he represents a new experiment in Punjab that went wrong both because of his own limitations and the failings of his leader. Few will mourn his exit.

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Transgender killings

SPURNED by family and largely scorned by society as they live, even in death transgender persons cannot hope to be treated as equal citizens. A spate of targeted attacks on transpersons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has again shone a spotlight on the harsh realities of life for this cruelly marginalised community. A story published recently in these pages uncovered that a toxic belief that one ‘owns’ the person they desire is behind men violently attacking and killing transpersons in KP. Experts say that a culture of impunity has taken root over the years, with the murder of transpersons seldom prosecuted and killers walking free without being punished for their crimes. The recent surge in murders and violent attacks is also a clear indicator that the matter is low on the provincial police’s priority list. Indeed, the biggest complaint put forth by community

representatives is that police have repeatedly bungled investigations and failed to register proper FIRs and collect the evidence necessary to convict the murderers.

The families of transgender persons, too, are of little help in prosecuting murders, as they either disassociate completely — refusing to take part even in the burial of their loved ones — or simply pocket ‘blood money’ settlements and allow the killers to walk free. Therefore, while the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government’s attempts at greater inclusion of the trans community are certainly commendable, it is clear that legislation alone is not going to be enough. There needs to be greater public awareness of the issues facing the transgender community to encourage the citizenry to proactively invite transpersons into mainstream society. As far as preventing more deaths is concerned, the government may consider the community’s demand that the state become a party in murder cases. As the victims do not leave behind any real heirs willing to fight for their cause, the state must step in by supporting the trans community as well as by providing material resources to hire strong legal counsel to prosecute the killers.

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Negev meeting

THE recent meeting in the Negev desert, which brought together top officials from Israel, the US and those Arab regimes that have normalised ties with Tel Aviv, has been widely seen as a jamboree of peace. But the message that emanated from the moot was far more ominous in the regional context. For starters, though the Arab foreign ministers of Egypt, Bahrain, Morocco and the UAE backed a “peaceful resolution” of the Arab-Israeli dispute, the irony that the Palestinians were not invited to a meeting held in their own land was difficult to escape, reinforcing the perception that they had been thrown under the bus by their Arab brethren. Moreover, the conclave also strengthened the view that the US and Israel were firming up an anti-Iran coalition. If there were any doubts about this particular motive, the Israeli foreign minister cleared them up when he emphatically declared that a “new regional architecture” was being created to deter “our common enemies, first and foremost Iran”. This, then, was the key reason behind arranging the Negev meeting.

Clearly, a complex game is underway in the Middle East, with mixed messages being sent. For example, the US, the Europeans and the Iranians themselves say a new nuclear deal to revive the JCPOA is “close”. Moreover, the UAE has also made overtures to Iran in recent days, indicating that it wants to rebuild relations with the Islamic Republic. Yet, alongside these developments, there is the talk of a new regional anti-Iran “architecture”, with Israel regularly issuing bellicose statements targeted at Tehran. In the midst of such mixed messaging, there are very real possibilities of things getting out of hand and triggering a new flare-up in the region. If regional states are genuinely interested in peace, then it is obvious that all stakeholders should support the revival of the nuclear deal and work towards a conducive atmosphere. Moreover, dialogue between Iran and the Arabs to iron out mutual differences would benefit the region. The latter process can include the Gulf sheikhdoms, with Saudi Arabia playing a lead role. Making hostile anti-Iran noises and standing next to the Israelis is not the answer. The US as well as its local allies must be clear in their views: do they seek confrontation with Iran, or peace? If they prefer to build bridges then the belligerent rhetoric must be abandoned so that a genuine peace process with Iran can get underway.

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Ramazan prices

CAUGHT in a two-digit inflationary spiral for almost three years now, Pakistanis must brace themselves for the customary Ramazan food price hike. The difference between now and the previous years is that the incumbent government is completely distracted by the damaging political salvos launched by the opposition political parties to topple the prime minister. Even though the holy month of Ramazan is still a few days away, the prices of most essential kitchen items, including vegetables, sugar, edible oil and ghee, meat, eggs, pulses, etc. have been substantially increased across the board by unscrupulous traders to make quick bucks, and have added to the economic sufferings of low-to middle-income consumers. The prices are anticipated to shoot up further after the commencement of the month of fasting as the demand for these food items surpasses their supply, with the administration likely to play the role of the helpless spectator in the days ahead.

Though the provincial governments have announced they will set up Ramazan bazars to provide essential kitchen products at ‘subsidised’ rates in line with past practices, the absence of effective quality checks means that the hapless consumers are likely to end up paying a higher price for poor-quality food items even in state-managed markets. Controlling prices and checking hoarding and profiteering by traders during Ramazan has never been easy for governments, their claims to the contrary notwithstanding. The bureaucracy often blames the absence of a legal system to take action against the large numbers of crooked traders. The consistent rise in headline prices, particularly of food and energy, in recent years has already significantly decreased the purchasing power of people, especially poor households. The CPI did show a minor dip in inflation in February compared to the preceding month, but the outlook on prices remains grim. Many fear that inflation in Ramazan will increase food insecurity in the country — Pakistan was ranked an alarming 92nd among 116 nations on the Global Hunger Index in 2021 and its level of hunger was labelled as ‘serious’ — during the month of fasting, and after, owing to decreased affordability among those in the bottom income quintiles. Past experience shows that raised prices rarely fall back to their previous level even after Ramazan. The hunger of politicians to cling to power is understandable. The question is: what’s the use of power if they cannot help people whose votes they need to form their government?

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Dreams of murder

HORRIFIC as it was, the cold-blooded murder of a seminary teacher in D.I. Khan by three of her students on allegations of blasphemy is yet another sign of the increasingly toxic social environment we live in. The incident was not the first of its kind, nor will it be the last unless the state decides to stop accepting, cajoling and using religiously inspired extremists for short-term political gains, and, instead, punishes them and their leaders for taking the law into their hands. What sets this incident apart from similar atrocities linked to blasphemy accusations, is its frighteningly surreal dimension. The three young girls aged 17, 21 and 24 — barely adults themselves — who allegedly murdered their teacher told the police that a religious personality had appeared in a dream to their 13-year-old relative to tell her that the teacher had committed blasphemy. It is a terrifying thought that the suspects had no qualms about going ahead with their deed — in fact,

deeming it necessary. Further investigation will reveal the truth — was it a case of being brainwashed by the anti-blasphemy narrative or was there another reason?

Sadly, others too have resorted to murder in similar situations. Both those accused of committing blasphemy, such as university student Mashal Khan and Sri Lanka factory manager Priyantha Kumara, and those defending the accused against such allegations, including Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer and lawyer Rashid Rehman, were killed. No doubt the killers were emboldened by the inaction of the state. Otherwise, blasphemy-related accusations would not reach such high numbers — 1,300 between 2011 and 2021, according to the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies. Meanwhile, in instances where the accused are acquitted of false charges, as in the case of Asiya Bibi, the extremist culture makes it very difficult to ensure their safety after their release. Blind extremism will keep on taking lives unless the authorities take radical steps to revisit the blasphemy law and ensure punishment for both those who indulge in false accusations and those who resort to violence.

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Fait accompli

THE prime minister is as good as gone. With the MQM's departure, the coalition government has lost the sliver of a margin it stood on. There is at the moment not much that Prime Minister Imran Khan can do politically to prevent further desertions. The mysterious foreign letter he had hoped would rehabilitate his misfortunes seems now to have been of limited utility.

As things stand, any chances of his survival have dimmed considerably. Barring the hitherto 'impartial observers' inserting a deus ex machina into the plot, his ouster is a fait accompli. Speaking of which, there are doubts whether the neutral factions have indeed maintained an even keel till the end, and murmurs that theirs is a house divided by the looming changes in Islamabad.

Meanwhile, it is difficult not to feel cynical when time-tested turncoats lecture the nation on how their latest defection is, in fact, good for the country. It comes as no surprise that the MQM has once again opportunistically traded its political

alliances for things it does not fairly deserve, calling it “in the interest of Pakistan”.

It is striking how the party has, over the years, displayed such a remarkable knack for finding itself on the treasury benches of every government formed since 1988, bar one. Its ‘pliability’, which is perhaps the politest way to describe it, is testament enough that it has no real principles on which to stand. How else would one describe its leaders’ change of heart when, after years of enjoying the perks of power, they so punctually decide to jump the fence when the grass starts looking greener on the other side?

What is unfortunate in all that has unfolded this week is that it is abundantly clear now that there is no real principle at play behind what is transpiring in Islamabad. All political forces have shown they are more than happy to play dirty if it means achieving the single objective of ensuring either the success or failure of the vote of no-confidence. The mandate given to each party by the people is being bartered or sold for a few votes here or there.

This no longer seems like a grand democratic victory for the opposition, which had started its campaign with slogans calling for respecting the vote and an elected, not selected prime minister. Instead, the campaign seems to have turned into a single-point agenda of taking down the PTI with whatever means necessary, even if it means lavishing favours on the same allies which had elevated it to power in the first place. On the other side, the prime minister has abandoned his principles after handing over all of Punjab to a party with barely a fraction of the right to govern it. There is little the citizenry can do but watch in despair.

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