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Haqqania bombing

THE bombing of Darul Uloom Haqqania in KP's Nowshera district on Friday marks a departure from the recent trend of militants targeting mostly security personnel and government officials.

A number of victims lost their lives in the tragedy, including Maulana Hamidul Haq Haqqani, head of the institution, who appeared to be the religious heir of his murdered father, Maulana Samiul Haq. The latter, along with his involvement in Pakistani politics, was known as the 'Father of the Taliban'; he had earned the moniker because numerous high-ranking Afghan Taliban leaders had attended his madressah. Media reports have quoted police officials as saying that it was a suicide blast, and that Hamid Haqqani was the apparent target.

While no group has claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack, the Afghan Taliban have insinuated that the self-styled Islamic State may be involved. An Afghan interior ministry official, while condemning the attack, pinned the blame on "enemies of religion", an apparent reference to IS. Those familiar with the militancy dynamics of the region also concur that there is a strong possibility that this is IS-K's handiwork, as the latter had been openly critical of the Haqqania seminary.

There is, of course, no love lost between the Afghan Taliban and IS, but from Pakistan's point of view, if the attack were indeed traced to IS, it would signal a fresh security challenge in KP. Already the province, as well as parts of Balochistan, are witnessing frequent terrorist activity believed to be carried out by the banned TTP and affiliated groups. IS is an equally — if not more — ferocious entity, with global pretensions and a mediaeval, sectarian outlook.

What adds further credence to the belief that IS may be involved is that the group, and those adhering to its ideological narrative, view clerics who endorse democracy in any form with disdain. The late Haqqania head, as well as his father, were active in politics, along with their religious activities.

It is also a possibility that the Haqqanis' strong links with the Afghan Taliban could have made them prime targets for rival militants. Only a thorough probe can establish the facts, while fresh IS activity in the country should be cause for considerable concern.

Nevertheless, the attack also offers an opportunity for Islamabad and Kabul to work together against a common, and highly dangerous foe.

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and were almost “seven times the average number of bills passed during the first year by the four previous assemblies,” according to the Pildat president.

However, the Assembly’s increased output should not be mistaken for enhanced efficiency or improved conduct. The Pildat president regrets that “Most of the laws were hurriedly passed without any meaningful debate in the standing committees or within the full House amid strong protests [...]”.

A cursory look at some of the laws is enough to bolster the impression that parliament has been acting merely as a rubber stamp for self-serving laws. For example, the 16th National Assembly enacted three amendments to the Elections Act of 2017, of which at least two are publicly perceived to have been aimed at, firstly, denying opposition candidates a fair chance at challenging their defeat in the general election, and, secondly, to prevent reserved seats from being given to the main opposition party.

Other ‘accomplishments’ included amendments to Peca, which the media fraternity, lawyers, and civil society are still protesting, as well as the decidedly anti-democratic Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act, which has rendered all public meetings and political rallies in Islamabad subject to the local administration’s whims and wishes.

Then, of course, there’s the 26th Amendment, through which the judiciary has been brought to heel, and the Members of Parliament (Salaries and Allowances) (Amendment) Act, which has increased parliamentarians’ salary from Rs188,000 to Rs519,000 per month. Despite all these ‘landmark achievements’, the government is still not done improving its own lot at the country’s expense.

On the eve of the Assembly’s first anniversary, it more than doubled the size of the federal cabinet. As to why this was necessary, there is no polite answer.

Considering that the prime minister managed to achieve ‘so much’ in his first year with just 21 ministers, why did he need 24 more in his cabinet? The state must now find the resources to pay for their salaries, perks and privileges despite the dire state of the country’s finances.

It is quite disappointing that both the government and the Assembly remained completely unbothered by public perceptions in their first year. Their disdain damaged the image of parliament and reduced its standing in the eyes of the people.

The vanquished

It should be becoming more and more obvious to anyone following the judiciary's new direction that the critics of the 26th Amendment were justified in fearing that it would be abused by the government.

Ever since its enactment, it has become progressively more difficult to rationalise the reconstituted Judicial Commission's decisions as politically neutral or objective. Take the recent expansion of the Supreme Court's Constitutional Bench, for example. Why did the bench need to be expanded with five judges, with five judges only, and why did all five have to be only those who have only recently been elevated to the Supreme Court?

There are no legal or moral justifications, only political ones, for why several senior, experienced judges were once again ignored during consideration. Even to the layperson, it is clear that now that the judiciary has fallen to executive control, the *vae victis* principle has been put into play.

Objectivity would demand that each judge appointed to the Constitutional Bench pass a rigorous test of merit and judgement in constitutional matters. What we have seen, instead, is an arbitrary system of appointment dominated by 'like-minded' individuals who feel no need to give the public any reasoning or justification for why they have made their decisions. This lack of transparency hurts judicial integrity.

Several judges and stakeholders had previously demanded that the Constitutional Bench include all Supreme Court justices, at least for the purposes of adjudicating on the question of the legality of the 26th Amendment. This demand has been repeatedly ignored, and the recent expansion of the bench with selected judges suggests it may never be entertained. It is unfortunate that this path has been chosen, as it means that some important questions that concern the legitimacy of the Constitutional Bench itself may never be settled.

Those who have managed to impose their will on the judiciary should realise that they have won a pyrrhic victory. In dismantling a pillar of the state, they have gravely hurt the legitimacy of the current regime in the public's eyes. The Constitutional Bench is supposed to hear cases with far-reaching implications. Any impression that its judges have been cherry-picked erodes faith in its ability to adjudicate justly and sows the seeds for social divisions.

It is not proper or fair that certain justices are being repeatedly prevented from hearing any matter of national import just because they have vocally defended their independence.

A system of justice that is publicly perceived to be skewed cannot deliver judgements that the public will accept unquestioningly as objective and just. Without the public's trust, the apex court loses its *raison d'être*.

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Cricket overhaul

PAKISTAN'S team management has pleaded for time and patience. Cricket head coach Aaqib Javed took responsibility for Pakistan's dismal Champions Trophy campaign but said that the side's lack of experience proved costly. Assistant coach Azhar Mahmood blamed it on the lack of trust and the scant time offered to players to start performing. Pakistan skipper Mohammad Rizwan vowed the team would work harder and return stronger. Sadly, Pakistan cricket is back at the same place — a place it seemed to have escaped following its disappointing campaigns at the 2023 ODI World Cup and 2024 Twenty20 World Cup. The ODI series triumphs in Australia and South Africa had reinforced the belief that the team was back on track — until its flop show at the Champions Trophy at home. Past failings returned to haunt; losses against New Zealand and India were followed by a washout against Bangladesh as Pakistan ended at the bottom of their group. Aqib Javed noted that Pakistan had failed to make the best use of home conditions — teams such as Australia and New Zealand, who had beaten Rizwan's men twice in the preceding tri-nation series, have shown what it takes to win. Talk of an overhaul is rife; many former Pakistan greats are vocal about following merit in team selections and the need for consistency in the Pakistan Cricket Board leadership and decisions, as well as fostering an aggressive mindset in the team.

All this has been talked about earlier too. However, little has been done to address the problem. Aqib Javed was keen on backing the big guns — batters Babar Azam and Rizwan, and pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi, Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah — stating they were Pakistan's best. For a team that once had a number of players waiting to make the jump to the national team, this is alarming. The big guns failed to fire, the promising newcomers having flattered to deceive. The disappointing Champions Trophy campaign comes after the team's struggles in other formats. Pakistan finished at the bottom of the World Test Championship table. They lost all the T20s they played in South Africa and Australia. Pakistan cricket needs a reset. A long-term plan is needed to restore national cricket to its former glory, as the sport is in danger of following the declining trajectory of hockey and squash. The PCB has to act — fast.

Local representation?

THE disdain that major political parties harbour towards local governments is no secret. No party in power wants to lose control over the bureaucracy and the resources that their leadership uses to dispense political patronage aimed at pampering their constituencies. Added to this is the fear of having to share powers with, or cede them to, rivals at the local level, thus losing their leverage over the voters. These concerns continue, despite the LGs' minimal financial and administrative authority. While true for the entire country, this is especially the case in Punjab, which has been deprived of local representation since the PTI government dissolved LG institutions controlled by its rival the PML-N in 2019. Repeated interventions by the ECP notwithstanding, governments in Punjab have since avoided holding LG polls mostly on the pretext of altering the legal framework for the local bodies.

The reason the provinces are able to delay local elections for as long as they want is embedded in our Constitution. Indeed, the Constitution binds the federation and the provinces to establish LG systems in their territorial jurisdictions to devolve political, administrative, and financial powers to the third tier of government. But, unlike the case of the federal and provincial legislatures and governments, it does not provide a detailed framework to give constitutional cover to the establishment and powers of this missing link in the democratic chain. Though the ECP has again instructed Punjab to expedite the finalisation of its new LG model so that it can begin the process of holding polls, the government is unlikely to heed its instructions unless it finds the political situation favourable to the ruling PML-N. In the absence of a clear constitutional LG framework, Punjab has more than one way to scuttle any ECP directive and stall new LG polls for as long as it wants. And it will do so because of the challenge it faces from the PTI.

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Cold world

WESTERN countries do not have a heart for poor, non-white migrants. A recent BBC News report comprising leaked audios exposes the complicity of Greek authorities in the botched rescue attempts for the Adriana, which sank with 700 people onboard in 2023; 350 were Pakistanis and only 82 bodies were retrieved. In one call, Greek rescue officials order the captain to inform the approaching boat that passengers do not want to arrive in Greece. In another, they ask the "big red ship" captain to "write it in your logbook" that the migrants want to reach Italy. Their foul play was confirmed by a Pakistani survivor. This news coincided with the arrival of the remains of six Pakistanis lost in the boat tragedy off

the Libyan coast; of the 63 nationals, 16 perished and, Pakistani authorities say, 37 survivors have been tracked but 10 are missing.

Pakistan does little for a populace wracked by deepening poverty and violence. Recently, the law minister stated that 1,638 human traffickers had been arrested and 458 were convicted. While a clampdown is desperately needed, what is the government's blueprint for unemployment, pay gap, climate displacement, and other pressures that compel people to risk their lives for a better future? India and Bangladesh have accelerated development at home by providing skill training to their youth for employment. We, sadly, are a long way from ensuring peace and economic progress so that our citizens can willingly shun the dangers of flight. The fact that hundreds of Pakistanis who took illegal routes to Europe have perished is an international disgrace. The toll of the persistent internal and external cruelty perpetrated on our people should sear our collective conscience. As the truth behind Adriana and Lucky Star exposes Fortress Europe's racism and xenophobia, Western nations must spare a thought for their own role in exacerbating the same conditions. That is the white man's true burden.

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Failing women

OUR justice system has truly failed to protect women, a recent SSDO report has revealed. With conviction rates hovering at an appalling 0.5pc for honour killings and rape, 0.1pc for kidnapping, and a mere 1.3pc for domestic violence, we have a real crisis of accountability on our hands. Each day in Pakistan in 2024 brought with it an average of 67 kidnappings, 19 rapes, six domestic violence cases and two honour killings. And these are the instances that were reported. Social stigma and distrust in the justice system ensure that only a fraction of incidents in the country is brought to the fore. From the registration of cases to conviction, the path is riddled with obstacles. Statistics show that in Punjab, out of 4,641 rape cases, only 20 resulted in convictions. Shockingly, Sindh and Balochistan recorded zero rape convictions.

So, what has led to such abysmal conditions when it comes to gender-based violence in our country? For one, patriarchal norms that have long permeated law-enforcement and judicial bodies lead to an environment where victims are often not believed or are pressured to withdraw their cases. Out-of-court settlements have sadly become the norm, often sanctioned by informal jirgas and panchayats. Investigations, if they ever occur, are routinely mishandled with inadequate evidence collection and victim intimidation. Procedural delays see cases stretch on for years without resolution. Police departments lack specialised GBV units, which has resulted in inconsistent handling of cases, allowing

the perpetrators to evade justice. Reforms are sorely needed if we are to address these issues. Firstly, female police officers must be hired on priority. Female officers bring essential perspective and sensitivity to GBV cases and create a more comfortable environment for survivors to report crimes. Currently, women represent less than 2pc of our police force — a figure that must increase dramatically if we hope to build trust with victims. In addition, fast-track courts that are dedicated to hearing GBV cases must be established to overcome judicial delays. Legal aid for survivors must be guaranteed and expanded and out-of-court settlements in cases of sexual and domestic violence must be outlawed. For their part, law-enforcement agencies must improve forensic evidence collection and digitally track cases to prevent bureaucratic delays. Without decisive action, countless women will continue to suffer violence, with little hope of seeing their perpetrators brought to book.

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Aid dependency

WITH Donald Trump and Elon Musk effectively dismantling the US Agency for International Development, and no guarantee that America's humanitarian arm will emerge intact after the ongoing 'restructuring', developing states, including the CSOs working in these countries, must come up with contingency plans. The changes USAID is undergoing will have a global impact, with the developing world — including Pakistan — particularly affected.

Although the aid agency has been known to participate in dubious overseas missions, for example regime change, its funds were helping crucial sectors in developing states, such as health, education and climate. It disbursed billions of dollars in assistance, helping fund projects to save lives, prevent disease and promote educational activities, among other initiatives. Now, for the most part, all of this will come to an end. Media reports say that some 39 projects in Pakistan, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, have been axed. It is also true that thousands of workers associated with USAID in America, as well as those working in the development sector worldwide, are now jobless due to the purge.

Two important points need to be made with regard to foreign aid. Firstly, Western states, particularly the US, have a duty to support humanitarian endeavours, specifically in states they have bombed and invaded. Hence, it is morally unacceptable that the US spent billions on destroying states like Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, but now feels the need to tighten its purse strings where the reconstruction of these countries is concerned.

Yet it is also true that the ‘dependency syndrome’ stemming from an addiction to foreign aid that ails many developing states, Pakistan included, plays a key role in allowing the governments of these countries to shirk their duties in the social sector. It is laudable when rich states offer a helping hand, but it is the primary responsibility of the governments of developing nations to provide their citizens with health, education, security, etc. While the USAID closure has come as a jolt, it might offer an opportunity to the developing world to take responsibility for the well-being of its own people.

The fact is that governments, including ours, need to increase funding in critical areas such as healthcare that have been affected by the USAID shake-up. Elsewhere, civil society groups need to adapt their policies accordingly and work to secure funding from other sources to ensure that important programmes continue. These include projects working for human rights, including marginalised minorities. It is no use shedding tears over the lost billions that will no more be making their way from Washington to developing countries. The time has come to take responsibility for our own development.

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IMF scrutiny

AN IMF delegation is in Islamabad to assess progress on the Fund’s ongoing \$7bn funding programme amidst hopes that the review will not encounter any serious obstacles that could delay the next tranche.

The mission will evaluate how Pakistan has done on quantitative performance criteria, structural benchmarks and indicative targets for the first half of the current fiscal year. There have been some “technical slippages”, such as delays in meeting the deadlines for certain goals, like legislation on agriculture tax.

Officials insist that they have covered all the bases, although the failure to meet the tax target will likely remain a major source of worry. Yet, the officials are confident that the IMF will ignore the slippages in the tax target because of a “higher-than-targeted primary budget surplus and greater-than-estimated revenue-to-GDP ratio”.

The FBR attributes the shortfall largely to reduced tax collection from imports, sluggish LSM growth and an unexpected drop in inflation. The IMF’s response to the tax shortfall remains to be seen. However, the stock market’s decline betrays investors’ anxiety at the anticipated contingency measures under the Fund’s pressure to pull off the actual tax target.

The investors’ anxiety notwithstanding, the IMF’s scrutiny of Pakistan’s performance is most likely to progress smoothly without any harsh new conditions for the second half of

the present fiscal year, or punitive demands from the lender for tax slippages. That said, the ongoing review will be critical in determining how the economy moves forward.

On its success depend the strengthening of economic stability, official flows from other multilateral agencies, and upgradation of the sovereign credit rating, which is crucial to Islamabad's plans to raise funds from international bond markets. Any hiccups in the programme would put paid to these plans and lead to a new wave of uncertainty and volatility.

For now, the macroeconomic indicators suggest a temporary reprieve: the rupee has held steady, inflation has plunged to 1.4pc, the current account is running a surplus of over \$600m, remittances have jumped to over \$3bn a month, and exports are showing resilience.

These improvements are mostly due to financial support from the IMF and bilateral lenders, as well as stability in the global commodity markets. The price for this fragile stability has been massive though: a sharp slowdown in domestic growth as well as rising unemployment and poverty.

With the second Trump presidency in the US shaking up the global economic and political order, the need for freeing the economy from the clutches of the forces of status quo and restructuring it to get it back on its feet has never been so compelling. The current IMF bailout could be the last opportunity to avoid a repeat of the past.

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Diplomatic protocol

IT is a fact that KP — which shares a long border with Afghanistan — is directly affected by cross-border terrorism, while people on both sides of the frontier share centuries-old tribal, cultural, and linguistic links. Yet where the conduct of foreign policy is concerned, while the federating units, particularly those sharing borders with neighbouring states, ought to give their input, bilateral negotiations with foreign powers should be the sole prerogative of the centre. This should be kept in mind as the PTI-led KP government seeks to open dialogue channels with the Afghan Taliban regime. While meeting the consul-general of the 'Islamic Emirate' on Sunday, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur reiterated that negotiations with the Afghan side through a tribal jirga would start once the terms of reference were approved by the federal government. While there can be little disagreement with Mr Gandapur's assertion that negotiations are key to establishing lasting peace, how these parleys are conducted, and by whom, needs further attention. The KP administration has been pushing the idea of direct talks with Kabul for some time

now; the chief minister had mentioned the need for ‘tribal diplomacy’ at a meeting two weeks ago, while a similar proposal was also floated last year.

Considering our frigid ties with Kabul, and the fact that dialogue is preferable to confrontation, the Afghan Taliban should be engaged. But the centre must continue to lead this effort, with significant input from KP. Foreign policy should not be allowed to become a victim of political differences. At this time, different parties are in power in all four provinces and the centre; if all provinces were to pursue independent relations with neighbouring states, it would have a negative effect on the cohesion of our foreign policy. That is why external relations should remain the preserve of the centre, with all four provinces providing their input regarding the direction of ties with neighbours. The KP government has reiterated that talks with the Afghan Taliban will remain “aligned with security and foreign policies”. The best way to maintain this alignment is for the peace initiative to be led by the foreign ministry, where professional diplomats aware of the on-ground situation are advised by elected representatives and the provincial administrations concerned. It would be inadvisable for the provinces to take solo flights on foreign policy.

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Polio politics

THE dispute between the centre and Punjab over the detection of polio cases in Mandi Bahauddin is unnecessary and dangerous. While Punjab officials argue that the child in question does not meet the clinical criteria for polio, the National Institute of Health has confirmed the presence of the virus in her stool sample. At a time when Pakistan remains one of two countries still battling the disease, such discord hampers progress. The controversy surrounding the case in question highlights complacency. When health authorities contest scientifically confirmed diagnoses and present videos of children running about as ‘evidence’ against polio’s presence, they misunderstand the nature of the disease. Mild cases, where children retain some mobility, are actually indicators of progress in immunisation efforts — not proof that diagnoses are incorrect. Detection of such cases represents a success of our surveillance system, not a failure of our vaccination drives. As the NIH epidemiologist rightly noted, “What may seem like bad news today is actually good news for tomorrow.” This scientific approach must prevail over political considerations and provincial pride.

The path to eradication requires accepting hard facts. Each confirmed case — whether in Punjab, Sindh, or elsewhere — demands immediate response, not denial. Our surveillance systems must remain vigilant enough to detect even atypical presentations, especially as we approach the endgame of eradication. Moving forward, both federal and

provincial authorities must prioritise unity over division. The centre should ensure transparent communication of test results and diagnostic criteria, while provinces must accept scientific findings without defensiveness. Joint training of healthcare workers on recognising varying presentations of polio will boost our detection capabilities. Pakistan's children deserve protection from a preventable disease that continues to threaten their futures. This requires putting aside jurisdictional disputes and embracing collaborative action. Only through acknowledging every case — mild or severe — can we develop targeted strategies to finally put polio behind us.

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Demand for solar power

A GREAT solar rush across Pakistan is transforming the nation's energy landscape. Households and businesses are rapidly switching to solar energy for a cheaper and reliable power supply. With 22 GW of solar panels imported in the last 18 months, the country is going through a massive shift from grid to rooftop solar solutions. It is heartening to note that both the federal and provincial governments are striving to keep up with the change to enable this shift through various initiatives. While Sindh has led the distribution of solar equipment among its citizens, the free solar panel scheme for low-income households consuming up to 200 units a month is the first initiative of its kind in Punjab. As many as 47,182 systems of 0.55 kW and 47,301 systems of 1.1 kW will be installed under the scheme. Likewise, the national food security ministry is implementing a Rs201bn project for converting tube-wells to solar power. These initiatives are aimed at protecting consumers from soaring electricity prices that most households and businesses can no longer afford.

While the solar momentum being generated by rising demand and government-financed projects is welcome, it must be supported by a well-designed policy to offset the possible, near-term negative impacts of this shift. For example, the shift from national grid to rooftop solar is already believed to have contributed to reduced consumption of grid electricity and higher per unit rates for those who have not yet switched to off-grid solutions. Similarly, the solarisation of tube-wells is said to be impacting fast-dwindling aquifers, threatening agriculture and food security. Pushed by economic factors, the demand for solar solutions will rise further. No matter how advantageous the shift towards solar power is on account of its contribution to reduced carbon emissions and a cheaper alternative for consumers, it can have some unintended consequences for the broader economy if not regulated under a well-thought-out policy framework.

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Ad ban

SILENCING criticism is no solution, whether the issue at hand is social, political, or of any other nature. Unsurprisingly, weak rulers have always struggled to grasp this simple truth.

In era after era, we have seen dictators attempt to control the press — to cajole, bribe, or browbeat newspapers and journalists into submitting to those they were meant to hold to account. In every such era, there were many who suffered for choosing to put the public interest above other considerations. They endured physical violence, financial loss, and even pernicious lawfare.

Much of this suffering was borne with patience, because responsible newspapers and journalists always knew they could not abdicate their duty or betray the public's trust. They believed Pakistan is made stronger by their sacrifices. They should be honoured and remembered as the Pakistani media once again suffers one of the worst periods of repression and control.

Last week, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, in its 'Islamabad Declaration', pointed out how both military and civilian dispensations have deployed government ads as a way to "promote their own 'fake' news". For context, government ads are being denied to publications which have chosen to pursue independent editorial policies, ostensibly to choke their revenues and force compliance.

The PFUJ cited the example of this publication, Dawn, which has been denied advertisements by the federal and Punjab governments in particular since last October "because of its professional and critical approach in reporting and editorials". The Sindh government, too, has periodically withheld its ads for arbitrary reasons.

This is not the only way in which the authorities have tried to obstruct fair reporting. After the so-called 'Dawn Leaks', the paper's circulation was blocked in large parts of the country, especially the cantonment areas, on the orders of certain individuals. Gen Qamar Bajwa later reportedly stated that the crisis had been created so that his predecessor could secure an extension.

The current regime's attempt to punish the paper has taken a different form, but its aim is the same: to apply pressure tactics to gain compliance. This publication always takes into consideration multiple angles when making editorial decisions. Others may not always agree with its stance, but pressure tactics will not force Dawn to abandon principled journalism. Its duty, first and foremost, is to maintain journalistic integrity.

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Terrorism challenge

AS the country continues to face a multifaceted terrorism threat, the state has yet to come up with a matching response, even as we continue to lose a high number of security men and civilians to terrorist attacks.

Figures released for February by the PICSS think tank point to the grim reality we face: over 100 lives were lost to terrorism last month, with civilian fatalities (55) overtaking those of security personnel (47). In keeping with earlier trends, the violence has been concentrated in KP and Balochistan, with religiously inspired militants such as the banned TTP, as well as Baloch separatists, spearheading the violent campaigns.

Even in the current month, the past few days have seen numerous incidents of bloodletting. The latest incident occurred on Tuesday, when suicide bombers reportedly struck Bannu Cantonment. Earlier, an FC man was martyred on Monday when a woman suicide bomber, apparently belonging to the banned BLA, carried out an attack near Kalat. Four security men were similarly martyred in firefights with terrorists in North Waziristan. Meanwhile, the deadly bombing of the Haqqania madressah last week — believed to be the handiwork of IS — shows that other militant actors, too, feel confident enough to stage fresh attacks.

Many of these acts of terrorism have been carried out in regions bordering Afghanistan, where the Taliban rulers are hostile to some terrorist groups, such as IS, yet maintain cordial ties with others, such as the TTP. Therefore, Pakistan has few options but to cooperate on the counterterrorism issue with Kabul. But bilateral ties are going through a particularly low phase, with the Torkham border closed since Feb 21, after the Afghan side reportedly started construction in a disputed area. Things have worsened since then as both sides exchanged fire, involving the use of heavy weapons, on Sunday. The fact is that while Pakistan is right in blaming the Afghan Taliban for doing little to curb cross-border terrorism, if ties deteriorate further, it will negatively affect CT cooperation.

The presence of IS in both countries should serve as a point of unity for Islamabad and Kabul. Both sides confront a bloodthirsty foe, and the only way to defeat it is to work together. Having said that, Kabul cannot rage against the 'bad' IS terrorists, and feign ignorance about the malign activities of the 'good' TTP terrorists. Action must be taken across the board, and all terrorist groups that threaten Pakistan should be dealt with by Kabul.

On the other hand, the state here must go beyond rhetoric and implement a CT strategy that can deliver lasting results. Over 1,600 security men and civilians lost their lives in terrorist attacks in 2024. This blood-soaked trend must be arrested through an effective CT campaign.

Road ahead

PRIME Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently celebrated his government's one-year performance scorecard as a testament to its success in "steering the country out of multiple crises". He spoke glowingly on the macroeconomic stabilisation achieved thus far, which has been made possible with the help of a bailout package from the IMF, assistance from friendly countries, and sharp adjustments in the domestic market which, though they have inflicted unbearable pain on ordinary citizens, have also helped tame runaway inflation.

Mr Sharif's exuberance may be excused — the present government faced extremely daunting challenges from the get-go, and it deserves to give itself a pat on the back. Admittedly, a more hard-nosed assessment of what the country has gained and lost over the past year may yield more sobering reflections, but as far as political statements go, this one, at least, wasn't completely full of hot air. It is hoped, however, that it hasn't made Islamabad lose sight of its bigger goals.

As an opinion published recently in these pages warned, what comes next should be giving the PM sleepless nights. The macroeconomic stability he has been extolling will start seeming meaningless as pressures build to show economic growth. Ordinary people have seen their purchasing power decimated over the past three years, and now that prices seem to be stabilising, they will soon start expecting a return to their old standards of living.

Once that pressure takes hold, this government's survival will depend heavily on managing public expectations and delivering a path to prosperity that can avoid the pitfalls of past models to engineer growth. This, by no means, will be an easy task, especially if one factors in the seismic changes expected in international finance as the US's priorities turn increasingly inward, as well as the festering socio-political instability at home.

On the latter, it should be noted that where the government has achieved success in achieving macroeconomic stability, it has failed to improve social conditions or address political instability. The model it has chosen to respond to various existential challenges — use of overt and excessive power — will prove counterproductive once it starts needing public support during the critical transition from stability to growth.

It is well understood that the economy cannot improve till public sentiment improves, and public sentiment cannot improve if the state continues to act against public wishes. This, of course, is an entirely self-inflicted limitation and one which now requires some difficult measures to remove. However, there are no other options but to take the rocky road. Socio-political stabilisation should now be the government's top priority. Otherwise, the

fruits of its labour will not reach the masses, and the immense political price it has paid for stability will have been for nothing.

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Restoring hope

THE disillusionment of Balochistan National Party chief Akhtar Mengal should give all democratically inclined Pakistanis cause for concern. Talking to the media at his Kot Wadh residence last Saturday, Mr Mengal expressed considerable disappointment over what he sees as the capture of the electoral process by non-political powers. “Neither politics nor democracy is intact in the country,” he is reported to have said. Resenting the fact that past political alliances abandoned their commitments to Balochistan once they achieved their short-term goals, Mr Mengal pointed out that where the Baloch people were simply asking for development, basic facilities and constitutional rights, they are now agitating against unconstitutional actions and fundamental rights violations as well. While Mr Mengal may be seen by some as just one politician among many, the fact that he is one of the few Baloch nationalists who have invested deeply in mainstream politics and participated actively in the democratic process cannot and should not be disregarded. Indeed, his opinion is a canary in the coalmine, an indicator of how well-meaning citizens of the province view their relationship with the state. It would, therefore, be a grave error to ignore his apprehensions.

As the situation in Balochistan grows more fraught, the state needs to recalibrate its strategies and seek out all possible means of containing the unrest. One of the most obvious and prudent ways to do so is to cede more space to local political representatives so that they can raise their constituents’ concerns in parliament and address their needs with the resources that have been made available by the state. Unfortunately, the Balochistan Assembly is not seen as being representative of its constituents, and there have been frequent complaints that politicians from the province are not fairly elected to parliament. This concern was also aired by Mr Mengal on Saturday. In the absence of ‘real’ representatives, it is understandable why the citizens of Balochistan have grown increasingly alienated from the state. Though Mr Mengal has resigned from the National Assembly, it is necessary to keep him and other representatives of the people engaged in the political process. The people of Balochistan have as much right to shape provincial policies as the citizens of other provinces. This right should be restored as a priority. The rest will gradually fall in place.

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Cruel customs

THE recent rescues of two Asian black bears — Rocky from Jauharabad and Sunny from Jhang — remind us how the horrific practices of bear baiting and dancing bears continue in today's Pakistan. Rocky, a seven-year-old bear forced into 35 brutal fights, arrived at Islamabad's Animal Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre with multiple bleeding wounds on his face and back. Meanwhile, three-year-old Sunny was found emaciated, her teeth forcibly removed to render her defenceless, and displaying signs of extreme anxiety — all common in the dancing bear trade. Both animals had nose rings embedded in their sensitive flesh, used to control them through pain and fear. These two traditions — bear baiting, where bears are chained and attacked by dogs for entertainment, and dancing bears, where cubs are tortured into performing unnatural movements — are shameful relics that must be shunned. Despite being illegal for decades, these customs persist in rural areas where law enforcement is scarce and public awareness remains limited.

Why are such cruel spectacles so rampant? For one, there is economic desperation among handlers, who keep these animals as a source of income. Then, there is a lack of education about animal welfare. What many fail to recognise is the ecological importance of the Asian black bear, a vulnerable species whose numbers continue to dwindle in Pakistan. Organisations such as Four Paws International deserve commendation for their rescue operations. But individual rescues are not enough. To eradicate these horrible practices permanently, we need strengthened legislation with harsher penalties, expanded resources for wildlife authorities, community education programmes in vulnerable areas, and alternative livelihood options for bear handlers. The removal of Sunny's nose ring symbolises, as Four Paws' Dr Khalil noted, "her last dance". The government must commit to the welfare of these magnificent animals. No bear must be forced to dance or fight again.

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Terrorism ranking

IT is an unenviable 'achievement'. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2025, Pakistan stands second in the world — just behind Burkina Faso, and just ahead of Syria — in the ranking of countries affected by militant violence. Moreover, according to the index, the banned TTP, which has been waging a bloody campaign against the state and people of Pakistan, ranks among the world's top four deadliest terrorist outfits.

Before protestations are made that such rankings harm Pakistan's fair image in the world, the data presented by the study needs to be calmly digested. The numbers do not paint a reassuring picture. For example, compared to 517 terrorist attacks in 2023, last year 1,099 such incidents occurred, with half of the attacks carried out by the TTP. The index also confirms that KP and Balochistan are the worst affected parts of the country, suffering 96pc of the attacks. While the TTP carried out the largest number of attacks, it was the proscribed BLA that was responsible for 2024's deadliest terrorist rampage — the suicide bombing of the Quetta railway station.

The worrying scenario highlighted by the index is reminiscent of the predicament Pakistan found itself in nearly two decades ago, when it was confronting another terrorist insurgency spearheaded by the same malign actors.

Unfortunately, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has given great impetus to the TTP and other violent groups to take on the Pakistani state. The terrorism index recognises this, while there can be little denying the fact that militants find safe havens in Afghanistan. For example, the military has said that Afghan nationals were involved in the recent attack on Bannu Cantt.

But what is complicating Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts is the fact that relations with the Afghan Taliban remain poor. For example, Pakistani and Afghan forces have been clashing for several days due to a border dispute at Torkham. Difficult as it may be, mending fences with the Afghan Taliban is essential to tackling the threat posed by the TTP.

The Global Terrorism Index report recommends that Pakistan take "a combination of military, political, and socioeconomic measures" to deal with the militant threat. Yet the political tribes are too consumed by infighting to notice that the country is going through a major terrorism crisis, while other powerful institutions seem more concerned about 'digital terrorism' and other such 'threats'.

The dreams of economic revival and national harmony will be shattered if we do not wake up to the severity of the present terrorist threat. An effective CT strategy — with input from the civil and military agencies, lawmakers, and independent experts — is essential, for focusing on both kinetic tactics and long-term goals. Cooperation with foreign partners is

Pakistan has been recommended for inclusion in the list, along with Afghanistan, according to Reuters.

The Trump administration's position on Pakistan will become clearer with time, but what our leaders need to do immediately is to stop giving it more leverage by constantly seeking its approval. Our problems are ours alone to solve — the sooner we recognise that, the better.

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Higher power costs

IN recent years, soaring energy prices have drastically impacted Pakistan's economic growth potential in general, and its industrial productivity and exports in particular by raising production costs and reducing international competitiveness. Now a new report by the International Energy Agency shows that power tariffs for energy-intensive industries in Pakistan averaged 13.5 cents per kilowatt-hour in 2024, surpassing those in other economies, including both regional competitors and major trading partners. The report states that industrial electricity prices in 2024 stood at 6.3 cents per kWh in the US and India, 7.7 cents in China, and 11.5 cents in the EU. In Norway, a key European market, rates were as low as 4.7 cents per kWh. This means that our industrial sector is paying almost double the electricity prices compared to China, India, and the US, and 18pc higher than the EU.

Indeed, the adverse impact of higher electricity costs for energy-intensive industries was largely offset previously by lower labour rates and subsidised export finance, as well as energy subsidies and other incentives for the export industries by the government. Nevertheless, the situation is changing fast now, with energy, export finance, and other subsidies either being eliminated or significantly reduced under IMF pressure. This is adversely impacting the country's export competitiveness in global markets. Hence, the growing demand for a substantial reduction in energy rates for export-oriented industries. This is something that will not be possible for a cash-starved government to meet, unless it implements deep power sector reforms involving the creation of a competitive energy market, reduction in electricity theft and system losses of around 30pc, the restructuring and sale of distribution companies, and so on. Additionally, the government will have to cut reliance on imported fossil fuel, and effectively harness its enormous, cheaper renewable solar and wind energy resources. So far the movement in this direction has been very slow, notwithstanding the authorities' claims otherwise.

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PIA taking off?

IN the second round, the government says it is going to make prospective buyers of PIA an offer they can't refuse. What that offer is going to be will not be known until the authorities call expressions of interest for the sale of the national carrier three months from now. However, from what the outgoing privatisation minister said the other day, it is clear that the authorities plan to address most of the concerns of investors interested in acquiring the debt-ridden airline. These concerns, including but not limited to 18pc GST on the acquisition of new aircraft and transfer of a portion of the existing debt liabilities to buyers, were enough to scare away some bona fide investors days before the botched first attempt to sell 60pc of the government shareholding in the company, leaving behind only one real estate developer, who offered peanuts, and a hole of \$4.3m in the exchequer.

Something has changed since. Reports suggest that some major business groups from Karachi and Lahore are gearing up to bid for the airline and inject the required equity of half a billion dollars to expand the fleet and operations over the next several years if an unencumbered offer is made. Restarting PIA's profitable European operations followed by its resumption of flights to the UK and US will be added attractions for buyers. PIA still has the potential to make a rapid recovery if injected with fresh equity to expand its operations and managed professionally — something which is not possible as long as the company remains in the control of a parasitic bureaucracy. The successful sale of loss-making PIA is crucial for privatisation not just for the airline's own revival — the alternative is its liquidation — but also for the resumption of the overall process of privatisation of SOEs. The sale must be crafted in a manner that attracts businessmen who not only revive the airline but also provide credibility to the privatisation programme.

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Egyptian plan

AS the Gaza ceasefire faces an uncertain future, the Arab world has endorsed a new proposal for the occupied Palestinian territory's governance and rebuilding to counter Donald Trump's monstrous 'Riviera' plan. Hammered out by the Egyptians, the Arab League has supported the plan that seeks an administrative committee for the devastated Strip, while envisioning a multibillion-dollar reconstruction of Gaza without removing its Palestinian inhabitants. As opposed to this, the Trumpian scheme proposes shipping the Gazans off to other Arab states as their homeland is transformed into a garish real estate project, overseen by the US. The Egyptian plan is a definite improvement over this hideous proposition, though many questions remain. The US has rejected it, with an

official stating that “President Trump stands by his vision” for a Gaza “free from Hamas”. In fact, Mr Trump again threatened Gaza’s people with extermination unless the Israeli hostages were released.

Where the future of Gaza — and all the occupied Palestinian territories — is concerned, it is the Palestinians who should decide the fate of their land. Keeping this principle in mind, Mr Trump’s plan is a non-starter, and should be consigned to the dustbin. The Egyptian plan can be implemented, but realistically speaking, there are too many variables involved, and its long-term success is questionable. For example, while Hamas has tacitly accepted Cairo’s plan, it has rejected the imposition of a “non-Palestinian administration” in the Strip. Moreover, will the Saudis and Emiratis — whose riyals and dirhams are crucial for the plan’s success — be willing to put in money without Hamas’s removal, considering their deep distrust of the Palestinian group? Likewise, Washington and Tel Aviv will also want Hamas and other armed Palestinian factions out of the picture. Therefore, it is very difficult to foresee this plan working, and Hamas exiting the scene. The only practical point to emerge from the Arab plan is that the Palestinian Authority has committed to holding elections in the occupied territories “if circumstances” allow. Hence, perhaps the goal, along with Gaza’s rehabilitation, should be the revival of the poll process in occupied Palestine, so that its people can chart a democratic course for their future, and freedom struggle. Externally imposed plans, without a clear timeline for the end of Israeli occupation, are bound to fail.

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Miles to go

IS the state deliberately unconversant with the desolation faced by females? On International Women’s Day, global communities applaud women’s contributions in various spheres.

But for many places, this day is a reflection of the challenges that plague women’s journey towards empowerment. Take regressive societies and conflict zones — Afghanistan and Gaza — where women endure adversities that beggar description: they are made invisible through moral policing, denial of education, healthcare and employment, and experience violence, aggression, starvation and more.

On the home front, the realisation that a large part of Pakistan’s misfortunes is a consequence of women’s oppression is lost on the rulers. Pakistan’s women, largely encumbered by poverty, health risks and abuse, with scanty access to knowledge and opportunities, bear a weighty cross. Hence, the UN theme ‘For ALL women and girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment’, which demands action that assures equal rights,

Thankfully, the guns have remained silent since, but the threat of fresh hostilities looms large unless a lasting solution to this dispute is found. Commerce is central to the local economy, but all cross-border trading has been suspended since the initial closure. Moreover, residents of border villages have said their homes have suffered damage in the crossfire, and villagers have been asked by the authorities to vacate the area for safer locales. There have also been reports of loss of life due to the violent cross-border exchanges. While some efforts had been made to negotiate a settlement, these parleys were suspended when the exchange of fire picked up pace.

The Torkham dispute — and indeed all the controversies concerning the Pak-Afghan frontier — needs a permanent solution so that people's lives are not upended by closures and violence every few months. Pakistan needs to address this issue at higher levels with the Taliban authorities, with a clear demarcation of the frontier so that disputes do not arise. Long closures translate into hefty economic losses for locals and traders dependent on cross-border commerce. Pakistan and Afghanistan must also reach an amicable solution so that there is a mutually agreed regime in place concerning the documents required for border crossing. Pakistan cannot compromise on its security, and the border must be monitored for malign actors. But ordinary citizens in the two countries should not have to suffer frequent closures.

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Targeting students

THE Trump administration's mission to 'Make America Great Again' is well underway, and, in true Trumpian logic, it entails the immediate dismantling of everything that made America 'great' in the world's eyes. Be it insulting steadfast American allies and berating them at international forums; rolling back USAID and the 'soft power' it helped project in developing countries; upending global markets with 'America first' policies; cheerleading xenophobes, neo-Nazis and rabid Islamophobes; or gleefully dismantling various domestic initiatives aimed at fostering a more equitable and inclusive culture and society, America under Donald Trump seems intent on tearing up the image it had built for decades in the post-World War II world. Now, the administration has turned its attention to American universities, globally regarded as some of the best centres of learning. In an effort to punish these institutions, apparently for promoting progressive ideas which the MAGA movement considers antithetical to its mission, the State Department has started using AI to identify so-called ' Hamas supporters' among the tens of thousands of their foreign students. It intends to either deport those already present in the universities or cancel their visas, preventing their return.

In American right-wing and ultra-Zionist rhetoric, a ‘ Hamas supporter ’ is often used to deride anyone who voices sympathy for ordinary Palestinians. Unfortunately for those who came up with this policy, anti-Israel sentiment is quite strong even among the American Gen Z, ie, those of university-going age. A Harvard poll last year said only 29pc of American youth aged 18-29 years trusted Mr Trump on Israel-Palestine, while a poll conducted by The Economist said 49pc of them believe there is a genocide ongoing in Palestine. It seems likely, therefore, that this policy will polarise the country further. Meanwhile, it will send a message to bright students from around the world that they and their ideas may no longer be welcome in America. This human capital may go elsewhere to pursue their education, creating lasting linkages with countries other than the US. The result is likely to be a proliferation of newer perspectives, which would gradually erode the US’s hegemony on global thought and innovation. With the rise of Mr Trump, it has often seemed as if the world may be witnessing the end of another empire. The most unexpected part? How self-inflicted this decline appears to be.

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Banning groups

THE Punjab government has released a list of ‘banned outfits’, warning the public that giving money to these groups is a crime punishable under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997. Numbering some 84 groups, the list mirrors a similar inventory of supposedly proscribed outfits maintained by Nacta.

While these organisations — ranging from religiously inclined and sectarian armed groups to ethno-nationalist separatists — are supposed to be out of commission, in many cases this is not true, and they operate with relative impunity.

The rationale behind the Punjab administration’s move seems to be the fact that as many people give zakat and other donations during the ongoing month of Ramazan, care should be taken so that people’s charity does not end up in the coffers of terrorists. While this is a noble aim, the bigger question is why such a large list of terrorist outfits still exists, and why these groups have not been permanently disabled.

As Pakistan faces multiple terrorist threats, the state’s approach of banning groups, and then letting them operate with new monikers, must be revisited if we are sincere in our counterterrorism endeavours. For example, some groups on the list have gone through several name changes since the Musharraf era: their names change, but their leaders, operatives and ideologies remain the same.

Moreover, while the state has banned sectarian groups, they still freely organise and hold massive rallies in Pakistan's cities. Similarly, while those peacefully struggling for their rights get the rough end of the stick from the state, violent elements — such as the ladies and gentlemen of Islamabad's Lal Masjid — are treated with kid gloves, with the state 'negotiating' with those who have threatened it on multiple occasions. Until this glaring disconnect is addressed, Pakistan can ban a thousand groups, but militant violence will not come down.

If the state has banned a group on paper, this means it has sufficient evidence of wrongdoing against it. The logical corollary should mean cases against the leaders and financiers of such violent groups, so that they are prosecuted and jailed. Though some jihadist leaders have been prosecuted, many others remain free. The battle against violent extremism will be a long and hard one, and will require long-term efforts such as promoting genuine moderation in society, as well as deradicalisation campaigns.

But the first steps of this long struggle must be defeating terrorist groups in the field, and ensuring that banned groups are actually banned. If groups are able to re-emerge under new names and continue their destructive activities, all efforts to fight terrorism will fail despite the loss of tens of thousands of precious civilian and security personnel's lives.

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Water scarcity

THE Indus River System Authority has warned Punjab and Sindh, the main breadbaskets of the country, to brace themselves for up to 35pc water shortages for the remaining period of the current Rabi crops, including the staple wheat harvest.

The warning comes amid reports that the country's two largest dams, Tarbela and Mangla, are mere days away from hitting dead level. There is a likelihood that Punjab and Sindh might face a 30-35pc shortfall while operating the two reservoirs on the run-of-the-river mode at or around dead levels, the water regulator has told the provinces. This is in line with Irsa's forecast on Oct 2 that dam storage would reach dead level towards the end of the winter crop cycle.

Though alarming, the warning is hardly a surprise since growing water shortages for the summer and winter crop seasons have become the 'new normal' in the last several years due to the increasing number of dry days in a year as well as the shrinking glaciers resulting from climate change. Reduced precipitation is evident from the 40pc below-normal winter rains and snowfall between September and mid-January this year, which have created drought-like conditions across the country.

Dry conditions still persist in many areas in spite of the February rains that have largely offset drought-related risks to the new wheat harvest. Dry weather on most days has meant that the winter months were reported by the Met Office to be hotter than usual.

The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, and abnormal rains, show that we are already experiencing post-climate change conditions. Ranking as we do among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, we must urgently prepare ourselves for the costly and disastrous impacts of such events on our lives, livelihoods, food security and economy.

The need to meet the climate challenge is even greater when a country like Pakistan is prone to multiple disastrous events at the same time. For example, in 2022, we were first hit by a heatwave and drought and then flash floods that displaced 33m people, followed by landslides that destroyed infrastructure in KP and other northern regions. Tens of thousands of those affected are yet to be resettled and re-employed.

Sadly, our policymakers are not investing enough in helping the people and economy withstand the effects of climate change, though the danger is very visible. Climate disasters can severely stretch a country's resources. They can ruin countries unprepared for them. This year we may have averted any significant damage to our staple food despite water shortages and drought. But who can guarantee that we will be as lucky next year?

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Reckless rhetoric

ONCE again, the Indian leadership gave in to their worst impulses, with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar making dangerous remarks about Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Speaking at Chatham House in London, Mr Jaishankar said that the "stolen part of Kashmir" (AJK) must be 'returned' to India for the issue to be "solved." Mr Jaishankar has not only displayed an utter disregard for historical facts but has further poisoned the well of potential dialogue between the two nuclear neighbours. As the Foreign Office pointed out, Jammu and Kashmir remains an internationally recognised disputed territory. The FO's assertion that "India's prevarication cannot change this reality" strikes at the heart of the matter. No amount of constitutional tinkering or attempts to alter the demography of held Kashmir can erase the fact that the region's final status must be determined in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions through a free and impartial plebiscite.

This is not the first time the BJP government has resorted to such provocation. Since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, the Modi administration has sought to present occupied Kashmir as a settled issue, despite clear evidence of continued repression. The BJP's attempts to force demographic changes, suppress dissent, and stifle journalism in the region have only served to deepen Kashmiri alienation. Reports from international watchdogs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented the grave human rights abuses in the held territory, including arbitrary detentions and crackdowns on press freedoms. No amount of rhetorical grandstanding can erase these realities. Pakistan has repeatedly extended offers of dialogue to India, including Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's recent remarks in the AJK Legislative Assembly, in which he invited India to the negotiating table while emphasising that Pakistan would not compromise on its national interests. However, India prefers brinkmanship over diplomacy. The path forward remains clear. Rather than engaging in such escalation, India should heed Pakistan's offers for dialogue. Global stakeholders must also play their part by holding India accountable for its increasingly belligerent stance. Try as they might, Indian leaders cannot change the fact that they are Pakistan's neighbours. In these tense times, prudence cannot be understated. For lasting peace in South Asia, India must abandon such reckless rhetoric. Anything less is a recipe for continued instability in the region.

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Mosquito season

AS temperatures rise, the threat of dengue looms large over Pakistan. Its warning signs have already arrived. Dengue mosquito larvae were detected in 1,471 houses during a surveillance campaign in Rawalpindi. While the Punjab government has issued directives for amplified public awareness and a comprehensive programme to lower dengue incidence, the country requires more deeply explored precautionary methods to block a wave. Besides, climate change has led to heat- and cold-resistant mosquito species as well as a shift in the pattern of vector-borne diseases. Last year, dengue cases showed an upward trend despite cooler temperatures — in November, Peshawar logged 85 new cases of dengue haemorrhagic fever. The overall picture was not heartening: according to a National Institute of Health report, Pakistan recorded 20,057 dengue cases in 2024. A consolidated approach involving inter-departmental coordination for strengthened supervision and timely purging of larvae throughout the year, with penalties for those who flout the stated SOPs, is the answer.

Punjab has known success. In 2011, the province adopted a game-changing strategy involving collaboration between Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Indonesian medical experts to

help the government fight the illness. Along with proven procedures, medicines and machinery arrived in the country, including blood separator machines from Germany. Perhaps, it is time to revisit and replicate an upgraded version of the same in the country. We cannot afford another year of indolence. The federal and provincial administrations must embark on extensive fumigation operations in rural and urban areas, apart from preventing waterlogging to limit the havoc wreaked by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. All aspects of deterrence must be as fast-paced as mosquito breeding. Clean and ventilated living conditions with cost-free dengue tests are vital to keep swathes of people safe from infection. Pakistan must ensure that vector-borne misery does not mark the onset of each season.

Maulana's message

EVER since the rapid rise of global religiously inspired militancy over two decades ago, Muslim governments and ulema have tried to build counter-narratives using religious arguments to checkmate terrorists.

On a recent visit to the Darul Uloom Haqqania to condole the deaths of Maulana Hamidul Haq Haqqani and others in a suicide bombing, cleric and politician Maulana Fazlur Rehman also deployed faith-based arguments to denounce those behind the violence. To his credit, the JUI-F chief was quite bold in his rejection of militancy, saying that killing Muslims was not jihad but terrorism. He pulled no punches, describing those involved in acts of violence as "murderers ... criminals". As Pakistan confronts a fresh wave of terrorist violence, few political or religious leaders are willingly to so openly slam the fanatical forces involved in bloodshed by misinterpreting religious precepts. In that sense, Maulana Fazl's efforts deserve kudos.

However, it will take more than zealous speeches and fatwas to turn the tide against religiously inspired militancy. Firstly, we have to acknowledge our own mistakes, which have enabled the terrorist threat to grow in lethality and reach. For decades, the state itself promoted jihadi groups, until a U-turn was made post-9/11.

Moreover, most clerics themselves were all for using religious fighters in the battlefields of Afghanistan and held Kashmir. Many of the terrorists that today threaten Pakistan were either directly involved in, or inspired by, these conflicts. It should be remembered that the Haqqania madressah itself was considered a 'jihad university' for mentoring many of the leaders that would go on to form the Afghan Taliban. The problem now is that most jihadi fighters and ideologues refuse to end their 'struggle' on the advice of the state or mainstream clerics. In fact, takfiri groups look upon Muslim governments and moderate clerics as 'apostates'.

So while Maulana Fazl's words may have an effect on young madressah students or those sitting on the fence, they will do little to dissuade hardened fighters. Plus, attempts have been made in the past, such as the Paigham-i-Pakistan fatwa in 2018, as well as Gen Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation' scheme, to use religious arguments against militants, with limited results.

Without doubt, it is important for influential clerics to speak with one voice against terrorism. But a lot more is required to truly defeat the monster of militancy. This includes kinetic action, as well as deradicalisation efforts. It must also be said that the mushroom growth of seminaries — with little to no oversight by the state — also aids extremism and contributes to militancy. The road to a more moderate and peaceful Pakistan is a long one, but it is essential that the state and the ulema play their part in pointing the nation in the right direction.

President's speech

PRESIDENT Asif Zardari, addressing Monday's joint session of parliament to mark the start of a new parliamentary year, ticked off a standard list of all the things one expected to hear on the occasion. There was the usual concern about health and education, the welfare of Pakistan's young population, and growing incidents of terrorism. He also dutifully extolled the government's economic successes. There was the standard lip service to good governance, strengthening democracy, restoring public confidence and establishing the rule of law that is expected in all parliamentary speeches. The president took care to thank Pakistan's foreign partners for their support and reaffirmed Islamabad's diplomatic commitments, and also did not forget to give due consideration to CPEC and its centrality to Pakistan's interests. All in all, the speech was as usual as they come. To his credit, Mr Zardari also offered some subtle and not-so-subtle criticism of the government's shortcomings and placed on record the PPP's disagreement with the six new canals planned on the Indus, urging the rulers to revisit policies that were placing a strain on the federation and come up with "viable, sustainable solutions".

The speech may not be remembered so much for its substance as for the accompanying spectacle. The opposition, too, stayed true to custom, disrupting the proceedings with rowdy catcalls and sloganeering against ruling parties and in favour of jailed former PM Imran Khan. So raucous was the protest that it was often difficult to make sense of Mr Zardari's words. One was struck by how closely the image of the president sombrely reciting Pakistan's challenges while chaos unfolded around him resembled the state of the wider country. It has often seemed as if all of our present challenges have been eclipsed by a political dispute that has taken up the entirety of the nation's attention. The president seemed cognisant of this reality. "Think of the unity and consensus our country

so desperately needs,” he urged the elected representatives present. “Democracy needs give and take, and what better place to work on collective goals than this parliament?” he asked. He may as well have been speaking to the walls: at that moment, our elected representatives were too busy hurling invectives at each other. Good speeches alone cannot make things better. The country needs more than words; it also needs commitment and action.

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Indian takeover

BY the time the Champions Trophy final ended, the only indicators that the tournament had been hosted by Pakistan were the branding inside the stadium and the golden embroidery on the white jackets worn by winners India. Sunday’s title match at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium was all about India; its triumph capping its takeover of the tournament from Pakistan. Rohit Sharma and his men had won unbeaten, without setting foot in the country that was supposed to host it. But while they did showcase their prowess as arguably the world’s best limited-overs side, their glory will be overshadowed by the politicking that preceded it. India had refused to play in Pakistan and the International Cricket Council bowed to its demand. India played all their games in Dubai whilst the other teams travelled across Pakistan and then to the UAE to play against the Indians. India had a permanent home base and, as it transpired, it seemed they — with former Board of Control for Cricket in India secretary Jay Shah now ICC president — were the organisers of the Dubai leg. So much so that in the final, the presence of PCB officials was limited to tournament director Sumair Ahmed. Even he was not there at the presentation ceremony.

The balance of power is in India’s favour but they also have the winners to take them to glory. They made a home away from home and used it to their full advantage. In contrast, Pakistan could not even benefit from home conditions. Their tournament was over in five days after losses to vanquished finalists New Zealand and India in their opening two matches. Unlike the two finalists, they looked under-prepared and the debatable quality of the personnel was also laid bare. It was catastrophic. Returning Pakistan to the top of the world game will be an arduous challenge. But for now, that is India’s place — it has the team and the influence to hold on to it.

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State Bank's caution

THE State Bank's decision to pause its monetary easing cycle, after six consecutive cuts of 1,000bps in its key policy interest rate since June to 12pc, in spite of a bigger than expected drop in inflation last month, reflects its efforts to achieve a balance between emerging strains on the economy and the fragile macro stability.

Though CPI inflation is down to just 1.4pc because of declining food and energy prices, the "inherent volatility" in these prices poses significant risks to the current downward trend going forward. In addition, the sticky core inflation remains elevated. This means a halt in the monetary easing cycle is necessary to beat it down and counter the impact of a potential rebound in food and energy prices.

The external account has also come under pressure of late because of shrinking financial inflows and rising imports due to an uptick in economic activity amid growth in private sector credit. The current account deficit of around \$0.4bn in January hacked away at the surplus of just above \$1bn accumulated over the past several months with the help of rising remittances.

The current account is being used to make foreign debt payments due to weakening private and official capital flows into the financial account. The exchange rate remains stable but the international reserves accumulated in the last eight months have dropped slightly on account of debt payments due to a delay in some of the planned inflows, which may come through after the IMF review of its \$7bn programme. Foreign debt repayments of \$3bn, the net of rolled-over and refinanced loans, are yet to be made during the remaining period of FY25. Further, increased global economic uncertainty amid tit-for-tat tariff escalations amounting to a trade war between the major economies has posed a risk to international trade, commodity prices and inflation outlook.

No doubt the economy has come a long way from the edge of default less than two years ago, thanks to the implementation of stabilisation policies under IMF oversight. Key macro indicators have improved. But Pakistan is still not out of the woods. Both the fiscal and external sectors remain under stress, impeding the consolidation of the nascent recovery and the economy's movement towards faster growth.

While the fiscal sector is suffering due to lack of reforms to broaden the tax net, with FBR due to miss the fiscal year's tax target of Rs12.97tr by a big margin, foreign private and official flows have nearly halted. The global uncertainty caused by a steep hike in US tariffs has set off new disturbing forces. Without large, sustainable foreign capital inflows and structural tax reforms, the State Bank will continue to find it difficult to ease monetary policy without risking another deeper balance-of-payments crisis.

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Syria massacre

THERE were valid fears of sectarian and religious bloodshed when anti-Assad militants triumphantly marched into Damascus last December. Yet then rebel leader and now interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa, who traded in his jihadi fatigues for sharp suits, promised the world that there would be no place for such bloodshed in the new Syria. His promise has been severely tested as a spasm of bloodshed has rocked the Arab state over the past few days. There were initial reports of clashes last week between armed Assad loyalists and government forces in the coastal Alawi heartland. However, more horrific details have emerged, of Alawi families being butchered, or their possessions looted. According to a UK-based war monitor, nearly 1,000 civilians have been killed in the violence, most of them belonging to the Alawi community, to which Bashar al-Assad also belongs. Eyewitnesses say children were slaughtered by pro-government militants, while the attackers repeatedly said they would finish off members of the minority community. Some victims say that non-Syrian fighters, including Chechens and Uzbeks, were involved in the rampage. The bloodbath only subsided after the Syrian administration sent in troops to control the marauding militant groups.

Syria stands at a very dangerous junction. Mr Assad and his brutal regime may be gone, but the country is far from achieving stability. The fact is that the transition from religious militancy to democratic statecraft is proving to be a difficult one. Mr Sharaa — known for his fiery jihadi rhetoric when he was better known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani — has promised moderation, but the fact is that many fairly extreme militant factions still operate in Syria. In fact, many foreign militants have been given positions in the Syrian administration. Controlling these factions will be essential if Syria's rulers are serious in assuring the world there is no room for extremists in their country. Further complicating matters is the fact that Israel has expanded its occupation of Syrian territory. For Syria to rebuild, all foreign forces must stop their interventionist activities, while Damascus must disarm or expel all sectarian and extremist groups active in the country. This will be easier said than done as many of these outfits helped Mr Sharaa achieve victory. The interim Syrian leader has promised accountability for the recent sectarian massacres. He will need to act fast before such atrocities become the norm.

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at Quetta railway station also targeted the Jaffar Express. The fact is that in Balochistan freedom of movement has been greatly curtailed, with militants able to hijack trains and block highways.

The time for platitudes is over. Balochistan needs a solid security plan to ensure its people can live in peace, and carry on with their lives without the fear of violence. Up till now, the state has failed to do its duty on these counts. While there have been CT operations carried out in the province, resulting in the martyrdom of security men, no long-term stability has been achieved through these actions.

This means that the state must review its strategy. For one, there can be no more no-go areas and ungoverned spaces where militants run fiefdoms. The state must exercise its writ over the entire province. Secondly, the military has confirmed that the terrorists who attacked the Jaffar Express were in contact with “supporters and masterminds” in Afghanistan. Pakistan must forcefully take this matter up at the diplomatic level with the Afghan Taliban regime, while other hostile states must also be warned not to indulge in misadventures. There can be no compromise on internal security. The sophistication of the attack indicates that the separatists likely had support from experienced external players.

Beyond kinetic actions, there must be sincere efforts to address the root causes of Balochistan’s misery that are exploited by separatists. These include enforced disappearances, the province’s appalling socioeconomic indicators, and curbs on political activity. While no cause can justify atrocities that target civilians, many voices — including this paper’s — have been raising these issues for years. But those who make and execute policies in this country are not listening.

Security and the rule of law are essential. Lasting peace in Balochistan, however, can only come when there is good governance, the province’s people have a share in its mineral wealth and other resources, and the genuine representatives of the inhabitants are allowed to take the democratic process forward. The Jaffar Express assault shows that time may be running out before the separatist insurgency spreads further. The rulers must act now to save Balochistan.

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Suffocating crisis

THREE of the five countries with the most polluted air on Earth are in South Asia. They include Pakistan, which has earned itself the unwanted bronze medal in the rankings, coming behind Chad in Africa and Bangladesh. The country's annual average concentration of PM_{2.5} stands at a staggering 73.7 micrograms per cubic metre, according to the World Air Quality Report published by IQAir, a Swiss air-quality firm. That is nearly 15 times the level deemed acceptable by the WHO. The situation is particularly bad in urban centres. Lahore crossed the 100µg/m³ threshold for the first time since 2018. November saw five cities exceed 200µg/m³, while December recorded nine cities above 120µg/m³. Such toxic air had great ramifications: school closures, shuttered public spaces and hospitals overwhelmed with respiratory cases.

A noxious cocktail of factors drives this crisis. Agricultural stubble burning meets temperature inversions in winter months, trapping pollutants at ground level. Brick kilns, operating with antiquated technology, spew particulates skyward. Industrial facilities, many operating without proper emissions controls, add to the miasma. Vehicular emissions from ageing transport fleet further thicken the haze. Regional dynamics complicate matters. Pollution recognises no borders, and events like Diwali celebrations in India contribute to transboundary contamination. Yet pointing fingers across frontiers offers little relief to citizens choking on toxic air. The government's response offers a case study in policy incoherence. Efforts to regulate brick kilns have been sporadic and poorly enforced. Public transport initiatives remain underfunded. Air quality monitoring networks are patchy at best, leaving citizens in an information vacuum about the dangers they face. What Pakistan needs is a national clean air policy that matches the scale of the crisis. Declaring air pollution an emergency would be a start, followed by the creation of a dedicated regulatory body with genuine enforcement powers. Market-based mechanisms could accelerate the adoption of cleaner technologies, complemented by stricter emissions standards. The farm sector requires alternatives to stubble burning, potentially through waste-to-energy programmes that turn a pollution problem into an opportunity. The economic costs of inaction are substantial. Lost productivity from illness, premature deaths and diminished cognitive function among children represent a drag on our already struggling economy. Pakistan must act decisively or resign itself to its citizens perpetually gasping for breath.

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Captive grid

IT is a common practice: the government makes commitments with global lenders for their money and then tries to wriggle out of them when faced with pressure from powerful lobbies that might be affected. Previously, it would find a way around the agreed reforms. But no longer. On Tuesday, it had to notify a grid levy of Rs791/mmBtu on all supplies of domestic gas and imported LNG to captive power plants as required under the ongoing IMF programme. The policymakers had been delaying the levy under pressure from the wealthy textile lobby but were forced to notify it after the visiting IMF mission, currently scrutinising progress on the present loan agreement, took a “tough stance”.

The new levy raises the gas prices for captive power by 23pc to Rs4,291 and comes on top of the recent increase of Rs500 to meet power sector restructuring benchmarks under the IMF loan. The idea behind making gas supplies expensive for captive power is to discourage cheaper self-generation by the industry, and force it to switch to grid power for its electricity needs to boost consumption of excess grid electricity for long-term power sector viability. The shift will deprive the industries of a cheaper energy source, making exports more expensive. However, it will potentially lead to an average reduction of Rs2 per unit for every consumer linked with the grid, a goal for which Aptma and FPCCI had launched a campaign against the IPPs. Besides, it must force textile exporters to invest in plant efficiencies, and move towards value-added products for higher export earnings. Simultaneously, distribution companies will have to invest in their networks to ensure reliable supplies to industrial users apart from expanding to areas where factories still cannot access the grid. That said, the government needs to urgently come up with a plan to reduce the burden of Rs1.5 per unit on grid users due to its bad rooftop green metering policy for affluent segments of society.

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Cohesive response

WITH a long history of terrorist attacks in the country, it is a pity that, instead of taking steps to pre-empt, or at least minimise, them, the government begins to calibrate some kind of a response only after the event.

A day after the terrorist hijacking of the Jaffar Express ended, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif headed to Quetta on Wednesday to take stock of matters, while the Foreign Office shared details of external involvement in the incident. Mr Sharif reiterated the need for national unity at this time of crisis, and acknowledged that the lack of development in Balochistan was an obstacle to eliminating terrorism. The FO, meanwhile, reaffirmed the

governments appear to have the capacity or apparatus needed to effectively levy the new rates. Perhaps the issue is politically too explosive for them, especially Punjab and Sindh, that together contribute more than 90pc of the country's farm output, to implement the tax anytime soon. This is despite the fact that effective taxation of agriculture income is a core condition of the IMF bailout and part of the overall tax system reforms. "...[T]he provinces will take steps to increase their own tax collection efforts ... [on] agriculture income tax", says the loan agreement.

How important farm tax collection is for the IMF can be gauged from the fact that the Fund's review mission has spent nearly two days engaging individually with the provinces and holding a joint technical workshop to explore the way forward for an effective and uniform collection of this levy. Seemingly, all the provinces are in the same boat as far as their preparedness for agriculture income tax collection is concerned. This is not surprising given the fact that none of the provinces have ever prepared themselves for this task because it involves strong resistance from the growers' lobby in the assemblies. Neither PML-N nor the PPP would risk losing their support by enforcing the law in the near future. Moreover, the effective enforcement of the tax requires capacity building of revenue officials to assess farm incomes that vary from region to region and crop to crop, digitisation of the land record, etc. Its collection will also be a challenge because a large portion of the agriculture market in the country functions outside the documented economy, and transactions are conducted in cash. While it is important for the IMF to continue to insist on early enforcement, it must also help develop a comprehensive framework for implementation.

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Closing the gap

PAKISTAN continues to struggle with gender inequality in its labour market. A new report by the ILO shows just how disparate incomes in the country's workforce are. Women earn a mere Rs750 for every Rs1,000 that men make per hour of work, representing a 25pc gender pay gap that rises to 30pc when calculated on monthly wages. This places our gender wage inequality among the highest in the region, significantly worse than Sri Lanka (22pc), Nepal (18pc), and Bangladesh (-5pc). What is particularly troubling is that this disparity cannot be explained by differences in education, skills or job sectors. The vast majority of the gap is attributable to what the ILO diplomatically terms "unexplained factors" — more plainly, discrimination. This discrimination is most pronounced in informal and household employment sectors, where the pay gap exceeds 40pc.

There are, however, rays of hope. The gender pay gap has decreased from 33pc in 2018 to 25pc in 2021. More importantly, the gap nearly disappears in the formal economy and public sector, where labour laws are more rigorously enforced. This contrast offers a clear roadmap for addressing the problem. Pakistan needs to make certain that its provincial legislation is updated to fully comply with ILO Convention No 100, ensuring that “remuneration” encompasses all forms of compensation. Only Balochistan has explicitly incorporated the principle of equal pay for work of equal value — other provinces must follow suit and implement gender-neutral job evaluation systems. Additionally, the limitations on female employment in certain sectors should be critically reviewed, maternity leave policies harmonised, and childcare services expanded. Most crucially, existing labour laws must be enforced through robust inspection systems. The economic cost of gender inequality extends far beyond immediate wage differences. When half the population faces systemic barriers to fair compensation, the entire economy suffers. The path forward is clear; the question is whether we have the political will to take it.

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Revised solar policy

THE decision to significantly revise down buyback prices at which power distribution companies purchase electricity from rooftop solar system owners is the correct step towards energy price equity for all consumers.

Under the revised net-metering policy, distribution companies will buy unused surplus solar electricity from net-metered consumers at Rs10 per unit, down by nearly 63pc from Rs27, during the day while selling grid power to them for Rs42 during off-peak hours, and Rs48 during peak hours (the prices are ‘net of applicable taxes’) or at the applicable rates being paid by households connected to the national grid. The revised tariffs will apply to new distributed solar or net-metered consumers; existing beneficiaries will shift under this framework after the expiry of their seven-year contracts. Besides, net-metered consumers would no longer be allowed to instal solar capacity exceeding their sanctioned load, except for a 10pc cushion, compared to the current 50pc margin.

The revisions became necessary due to three factors. One, most rooftop solar power owners have installed far more surplus solar power than they need for self-consumption. This helps them export surplus electrons to the grid during the day, and import them after sunset. Surplus electrons exported to distribution firms in winter are often reclaimed in summer. It amounts to using the grid as a big storage battery while avoiding payment of capacity charges and transmission costs on electricity consumption.

Second, affluent urban net-metered households are causing a nine-paisa per unit impact on average electricity cost which, the energy ministry says, could increase to Rs3.6 by 2034 if the policy is not changed. By the end of December 2024, the existing 283,000 rooftop solar owners had already transferred the burden of Rs159bn to those dependent on grid power. Third, there are valid concerns that higher penetration of distributed solar could put the infrastructure at risk of failure since most net-metered surplus loads are concentrated in larger cities where rapid capacity expansion might compromise supply stability.

It is but natural that the changes in the distributed solar policy, leading to the reduction in buyback rates, and the shift to net billing from net metering, have come under criticism. But the opprobrium generated by the policy revisions are misplaced because these will increase the payback periods for consumers who have installed or planned to instal oversized solar systems. The falling solar panel and equipment prices will keep the payback period short despite tighter net-metering conditions, at least for those who have just enough capacity for self-consumption despite the changes in the tariff structure for distributed solar. Some may argue that the alterations in incentives will discourage rooftop solarisation, but that is unlikely because solar power is still cheaper than the grid and becoming more cost-effective as technology improves.

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Toxic prejudice

WITH far-right movements on the march across the world, it is no surprise that anti-Muslim bias is witnessing high levels in many non-Muslim societies. Thus, as the world observes the International Day to Combat Islamophobia today, there must be a renewed pledge from governments across the world to fight toxic anti-Muslim prejudice, as well as discrimination against believers of all faiths. The resolution to mark the day was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2022, and Pakistan was instrumental in the passage of the document. However, despite the noble intentions of the resolution, Muslims across the world continue to face different forms of violence. For example, UK-based group Tell MAMA says there was a 73pc rise in Islamophobic assaults in Britain last year, while CAIR, a Muslim advocacy group in America, says there were over 8,600 anti-Muslim and anti-Arab incidents reported in 2024. However, Islamophobia is not just confined to the West; Muslims in India have been enduring sustained attacks on their faith and traditions during the BJP's rule.

While, according to a UN expert, Islamophobia hit "epidemic proportions" in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, today various causes are attributed to incidents of anti-Muslim hatred.

Among these is the Israeli genocide in Gaza, supported by many Western states, which has propelled anti-Muslim sentiment. Exploiting the conflict are far-right groups, which paint Muslims as a dangerous minority out to destroy 'our' way of life. What is particularly distressing is that in many places in Europe — Germany, Austria, the UK — these far-right actors have made considerable gains at the ballot box. Meanwhile in the US, many amongst President Donald Trump's inner circle are known to harbour anti-Muslim views. It is, then, no coincidence that Islamophobia in Western states has risen as xenophobic forces have gained more political power. Big Tech, particularly Elon Musk, has also played a role in demonising Muslims. To combat the rising tide of hate, governments must take action against violent hatemongers who threaten peaceful Muslims, while as suggested by the UN secretary general, online platforms must do more to tackle hate speech. It may be Muslims today, but if the world remains silent, other racial and ethnic minorities will be next on the hit list of far-right extremists. Therefore, all people of conscience need to speak up against religious, racial and ethnic bigotry.

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Children in jails

PAKISTAN'S children in prison have often been treated like adult criminals. The Sindh government's programme to educate 4,684 children of convicted prisoners in the province is a glimmer of light in a dark space. The scheme — an initiative of the education and prisons departments and Paigham-i-Pakistan — offers complete educational support in private and government institutions to children born in jails. But the government has to be mindful of the fact that its failure to serve as a blanket policy for all juveniles will lead to controversy. Statistics issued by the Sindh Prisons and Corrections Service in 2023 showed that 385 juvenile offenders — 106 of them under 16 years of age and 100 under the age of 18 — languished in prisons across the province. Sadly, these numbers have seen a substantial rise, yet their treatment indicates that they are not seen as the nation's children.

Children should not be in prison. To understand this, the authorities ought to delve deeper into the psychology of jail where alienation and harsh conditions shape the young into hardened offenders. Childhoods marred by poverty, abuse and being left out of school often lead to serious violations; research shows that juveniles exposed to conventional criminal justice systems are prone to repeating criminal behaviour. For worthy measures to succeed, the government has to own and prioritise the young in conflict with the law by ensuring stringent implementation of the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018, which says that anyone under the age of 18 is to be seen as a child. Secondly, Sindh must establish remand homes in each city. Currently, even the long sanctioned one in Nawabshah is not

operational. A reformative, rehabilitative environment with decent living conditions, counselling, skill training and education may ensure that the jailed young are not condemned to a life of delinquency. Impressionable minds exposed to apathy cannot contribute to society.

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Fault lines

IT was a distressing spectacle, though a sadly predictable one. As the National Assembly took up for discussion the recent hijacking of the Jaffar Express and the brutal killing of several of its passengers by BLA terrorists, it was evident how much damage has been wreaked on national unity by the gradual erosion of Pakistan's democracy. Nursing some bitter grievances, our elected representatives, instead of using the sessions to dissect how this devastating incident occurred and debating parliament's best response to it, appeared more focused on political point-scoring than national interest. Their indifference to the gravity of the moment was staggering as they traded accusations, instead of capitalising on the occasion to present a united front against a common adversary. It was particularly unfortunate that a federal minister, who ought to have been demonstrating a much greater sense of responsibility considering the circumstances, instead accused the main opposition party of 'sympathising with terrorists'.

It was quite ironic that the minister in question was regretting that the incident had been politicised by the opposition even as he did the very same himself with an unnecessarily provocative speech. One may reasonably assume that this is precisely the kind of divisiveness that the enemies of this country would like to see. It is also the kind of distraction that will allow those responsible for preventing such a serious lapse of security evade any real accountability for their shortcomings. The train hijacking should be a wake-up call to those who have hitherto refused to acknowledge repeated warnings that the state's favoured policies have often spelt disaster in the long run. The nation needs to be allowed to heal, and for that to happen, its powerful elites must stop attempting to divide it constantly based on a few narrow interests. National unity cannot be built on words alone — it demands accountability, vision, and an end to the politics of division.

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Embracing crypto

It seems a little prod was all it took for Pakistan to finally 'embrace the future'. The Pakistan Crypto Council has been formed as promised, mere weeks after a delegation representing American interests in cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies called on Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb to hawk its wares. According to a press handout, the PCC will oversee the regulation and integration of blockchain technology and digital assets into the country's financial landscape. The Finance Division has declared the PCC a "significant step in the country's efforts to regulate and integrate blockchain technology and digital assets into its financial landscape" while promising that "The council is set to play a pivotal role in formulating policies, fostering innovation, and ensuring a secure and forward-thinking approach to crypto adoption in Pakistan". It sounds wonderful on paper, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. After all, the state is still quite devoted to the idea of centralised control and conducting its business on paper, while the financial system remains tightly regulated. It will be interesting to see how disruptive technologies like blockchain and cryptocurrencies can be adopted in such an environment.

The absence of trained researchers and computer scientists from the PCC is another area of concern. Given the number of snake oil salesmen in the cryptocurrency and blockchain domains, one would expect a state-level authority to seek out the services of experts who have actually helped develop these technologies to advise it about how they may be capitalised on. Instead, the PCC, in its present form, seems to have only a single individual who may be considered somewhat knowledgeable about blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies, and while they seem experienced as a business and marketing strategist, their profile does not mention any experience as either a developer or researcher. It is hoped, therefore, that more technical experts will be included in the Council as it expands. Cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology have, no doubt, shown immense promise in improving various aspects of our lives. However, the state should resist hopping onto the bandwagon just because of the buzz. If it is serious about establishing Pakistan as a major player in these technologies, it needs to include scientists and technologists in the PCC so they can advise policy along with bankers, regulators, legal advisers and business strategists.

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After the review

THE successful conclusion of the first performance review of the IMF's extended \$7bn funding programme for the first half of the fiscal year is a positive development for the cash-strapped economy.

The end-of-mission statement acknowledges that “programme implementation has been strong, and the discussions have made considerable progress in several areas”, including fiscal consolidation for durable reduction in public debt, tight monetary policy to keep inflation in check, energy sector reforms, the structural reform agenda to accelerate growth, social protection, and health and education spending.

That the IMF and authorities here have “made significant progress towards reaching a staff-level agreement on the first review” underlines that the talks did not encounter any major impediment — a rare occasion in recent years where the lender has refrained from imposing stricter conditions after scrutiny of its programmes in spite of delays in the execution of certain goals and failure to meet benchmark targets.

However, this is where the story of the first review ends and future challenges begins. For now, the IMF has apparently ignored some delays and slippages. Whether it will continue to provide similar waivers on unmet goals over the remaining life of the bailout or start tightening the screws will be known once the Memorandum of Economic and Fiscal Policies is released by the lender and talks over the next budget conclude.

More worrisome is the increasing impatience with slow economic growth, as real estate tycoons scramble to persuade the prime minister to push faster growth by granting yet another tax amnesty and other concessions to the housing sector. The same group, which had convinced Imran Khan's government to allow a tax amnesty and lucrative incentives for the construction industry, is now active, and trying to coax Shehbaz Sharif to grant it something similar. Stepping into this trap would be suicidal, both economically and politically.

Ordinary people have paid a heavy price because of such experiments and do not have any strength to repeat them. The government would be doing them and itself a favour by focusing solely on restructuring the economy, preparing it for durable growth by attracting foreign private investments to boost productivity and exports rather than embarking on wasteful misadventures.

So far the government is delaying any decisions on such proposals. But for how long? Facing a formidable political challenge from the PTI in its stronghold of Punjab, it will increasingly come under pressure from 'pro-growth' lobbies within its own ranks and from outside in the coming months. Any unseen inflows from the Gulf could make it jettison the

reforms agenda and pursue consumption-based growth. That would be nothing short of a disaster for the country and its people.

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NAP revival

It is clear that in the midst of a fresh wave of terrorism, particularly after the Jaffar Express hijacking, the state cannot respond to the crisis using conventional approaches. Both the Baloch separatist insurgency and the TTP campaign of terror are posing existential threats to the nation, and if not handled with alacrity and foresight these violent anti-state movements can do much damage to the country's integrity. While discussing the details of the Jaffar Express episode last week, the DG ISPR mentioned that if the 14 points of the revised National Action Plan were focused on, "terrorism can be eradicated". The federal minister of state for interior made similar remarks in the National Assembly.

While the original NAP was formulated in 2014 after the APS Peshawar atrocity, the plan was revised in 2021, highlighting kinetic and non-kinetic domains of the counterterrorism blueprint. Where the Baloch insurgency and the TTP campaign are concerned, the kinetic aspects of NAP are essential, as a state of insecurity is untenable, and all armed groups that threaten peace must be neutralised. Yet successive governments, including the current set-up, have not done enough to implement NAP's non-kinetic measures. These include supporting the reconciliation process in Balochistan, as well as overseeing reforms in KP's merged areas, which are hardest hit by the TTP insurgency. Unless action in the field is complemented with social, economic and political efforts in the militancy-hit parts of Balochistan and KP, led by the civilian administration, this bloody cycle of violence will continue.

While addressing the briefing along with the DG ISPR, the Balochistan chief minister, referring to the Jaffar Express ambush, said it was an act of terrorism, while dismissing the economic and political grievances behind the violent action. He is only partially right. There is no doubt that the train hijacking was a terrorist act, as innocent people were targeted. The state must therefore go after all those involved in this crime. But the fact is that Balochistan's socioeconomic misery is undeniable. Parts of the province live in mediaeval poverty, especially compared to urban centres in other parts of the country. This is despite the fact that the province sits on a treasure of mineral wealth. It is this deprivation, and the lack of political freedom for genuine Baloch leaders, that the terrorists exploit. Therefore, the non-kinetic aspects of NAP cannot be ignored in order to establish a lasting peace. The reconciliation process, involving those ready to give up their arms should be given a renewed push by political elements from across Pakistan. Certain red

lines are in order — for instance, there can be no compromise on Pakistan's territorial solidarity and the supremacy of the Constitution. Within these parameters, an organic political process can bring Balochistan back from the abyss.

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New reality

THE US retreat from global climate finance commitments could not have come at a worse time. Pakistan faces an imminent water crisis threatening our wheat harvest. Irsa's warning that Punjab and Sindh — our primary breadbaskets — may face up to 35pc water shortages as the Tarbela and Mangla dams approach dead levels illustrates the immediate challenges we face. These reservoirs, critical to our agricultural infrastructure, are depleting rapidly just when the wheat crop requires its final watering before harvest. With lower-than-targeted wheat sowing already a concern due to shifting policies, Pakistan now confronts a perfect storm of food security threats exacerbated by climate instability. Against this backdrop, the international climate finance landscape is crumbling. The pledge made at COP29 to boost climate finance to \$300bn annually by 2035 was already deemed inadequate. Now, with the US — responsible for about 10pc of the \$116bn provided in 2022, according to OECD figures — stepping back, our options for adaptation funding narrow considerably. Our recent history tells a grim story: devastating floods that submerged a third of our country in 2022, unprecedented heatwaves, glacial melt threatening our water security, and now agricultural disruptions jeopardising our food security. The burden is shifting primarily to the EU, but the bloc faces its own challenges: budget constraints, US tariffs, increased military spending, and the rise of right-wing populism hostile to climate policies. With major donors like the UK, France, and Germany announcing aid cuts, Pakistan must reckon with a harsh new reality.

So, what options do we have? First, we must implement immediate water conservation measures across all sectors, particularly agriculture, which consumes over 90pc of our water resources. Drip irrigation, laser land levelling, and water-efficient crop varieties must be prioritised and subsidised. Second, we must strengthen regional climate alliances. Cooperation with other South Asian nations could amplify our collective voice at global fora, leading to shared technological solutions for climate adaptation. Third, Pakistan must accelerate domestic resource mobilisation specifically for climate-resilient infrastructure. This includes exploring green bonds, carbon taxation on heavy emitters, and climate adaptation financing mechanisms that do not rely exclusively on foreign assistance. The path ahead is undeniably challenging. Yet, our survival and the food security of our population depends on confronting this new reality.

Killer traffic

MYSTERIOUS and unstoppable. It is these words that perhaps best describe the recent surge in traffic-related accidents in Karachi, which has also caught the attention of the chairman of the ruling party in the province. With citizens of the port city perishing at the hands of reckless drivers seemingly on a daily basis, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has reportedly instructed the Sindh government to go “all out” to curb further incidents. But what does “all out” mean? The Karachi police have so far appeared helpless when it comes to containing the menace. They also have no plausible explanation to offer for the sudden and inexplicable rise in the incidence of deadly accidents. While the city police have set up an official body to analyse road accidents, perhaps they should be looking inward as well.

It does not seem unreasonable to assume that the roots of the problem may lie in routine policing and regulatory failures metastasizing over the years into a major public safety issue. The enforcement of traffic regulations has, after all, been traditionally lax in the city, while the standard for issuing driver’s licences has also never been strict enough. The result is that there now seems to be a worryingly large number of people behind the wheel who lack adequate road sense or the capacity to responsibly operate their vehicles. Those on the road also often seem to lack respect for traffic police. The rampant ‘chai paani’ culture has allowed people to view traffic rules and regulations as ‘optional’ since there are very rarely any serious consequences for breaking them. Therefore, while the police are free to explore other reasons for the recent rise in traffic fatalities, they must also acknowledge these systemic failings and address them. Public anger has been brewing at the unchecked death toll. The police must respond with immediate and visible action. Otherwise, this situation could turn ugly.

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A new direction

WITH the security situation in Balochistan and KP rapidly deteriorating, Pakistan’s civil and military leadership must come up with a new plan to effectively deal with all aspects of the respective insurgencies.

This will be the main focus of today’s meeting of the parliamentary panel on national security. The in-camera huddle will feature the prime minister and army chief, all four chief ministers as well as cabinet members and representatives of political parties.

The threat to national integrity is significant, and this is no time for partisan politics; the state and its institutions must listen to all shades of opinion in order to formulate a holistic counterterrorism and peacebuilding policy.

While the TTP-led terrorist campaign mostly affecting KP has been steadily gaining momentum since the Afghan Taliban returned to power in Kabul, the separatist insurgency piloted by the banned BLA now appears to have large parts of Balochistan firmly in its grip.

This shocking reality was brought home by last week's bloody hijacking of the Jaffar Express, and the subsequent targeting of security men in Noshki. There is a long list of other major and minor terrorist incidents in the province. When the lawmakers, generals and politicians meet in Islamabad behind closed doors today, it is these grave threats to national security that will dominate the agenda.

The easiest course to pursue would be the kinetic response. But while this may temporarily disable violent actors, it will not address the underlying factors that have provided ideological fuel to these insurgencies: poverty, underdevelopment, lack of justice and the resultant alienation from the state. These factors, as highlighted by the non-kinetic dimensions of the National Action Plan, need equal attention.

Of course, securing territory and eliminating threats to peace are prerequisites for any plan to succeed. But unless the civilian arm of the state complements the kinetic dimension of CT operations with political efforts and meaningful development work, the gains in the field will be unsustainable.

Moreover, it is essential that all political forces are included in national CT and peacebuilding efforts. Accusing some parties of being 'anti-national' and supporting the militants' narrative is counterproductive. Helpful critique should be heard with open minds. The present course of action has failed to bring peace to Balochistan and KP, hence fresh approaches are required. Having said that, opposition parties should also refrain from scoring political points, and, instead, bring constructive criticism to the discussion.

The blueprint to contain violence and forge a more peaceful path exists in the shape of NAP. Now, all stakeholders must display the vision and the will to implement the document's points, combining force where required with political reconciliation in order to bring peace to Balochistan, KP and the rest of Pakistan.

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BTK settlement

WHEREVER the money goes, controversy follows. The PMLN-led federal government, which recently announced that it will be using '190m pounds', originally repatriated by the UK's National Crime Agency under a settlement agreement with property tycoon Malik Riaz, to build a university in Islamabad, is being criticised for not using that money to support existing public sector universities that have been suffering an acute funding crisis. The sum, which totals some 35bn in Pakistani rupees, could have helped bridge the Rs60bn shortfall faced by the Higher Education Commission this year, informed stakeholders say. However, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif intends to use that money to set up the Daanish University of Emerging Sciences, which appears to be an extension of the Daanish Schools project he initiated as chief minister of Punjab, and which is closely associated with his name. The irony of funds tied to PTI leader Imran Khan's Al Qadir University now being used for a different 'political' university project cannot be missed. It is undoubtedly hypocritical that what this government had spent months arguing were 'public funds' are now being used to build its own political capital.

It is worth recalling that this money, a little more than half of the total deposited in the Supreme Court's accounts on behalf of Bahria Town for its BTK housing project, had been allocated to the federal government by the apex court in November 2023. The remaining Rs30bn was handed over to the Sindh government despite severe apprehensions about the provincial government and its departments' central role in facilitating Bahria Town and abetting its unlawful activities, as established in the original judgement in the BTK case. Meanwhile, six years after its settlement with the Supreme Court, Bahria Town remains in default of the agreement. There is no clarity about how much it still owes the Supreme Court and whether it can or will pay the dues. The apex court and the government, too, have not been very clear about how the BTK judgement is to be enforced. The settlement was to expire in August 2026, by which time the developer was supposed to have paid Rs460bn in instalments, along with 4pc mark-up on all late payments. It had paid only a small fraction as of late 2023, having unilaterally suspended further payments after the £190m were credited, claiming it was being penalised 'unfairly'.

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Sugar crisis

GREED knows no bounds. But the avarice of those involved in the sugar business — from manufacturers to retailers — in Pakistan is legendary. The powerful sugar cartel is known for using its political clout to extort concessions from every government to make large amounts of money, in times of both shortages and surpluses. Nothing has ever stopped them from profiteering at the expense of unprotected consumers. This is in spite of evidence of the existence of a large grey market and significant tax theft by mill owners and traders. An FIA inquiry against mill owners and wholesale distributors, following the eruption of a sudden sugar crisis during the tenure of Imran Khan, recommended several actions to be implemented across the supply chain to regulate the sugar trade and prevent the recurrence of such events. However, the suggested measures never took off.

Retail sugar prices have again experienced an abnormal, rapid surge from Rs130 per kilogram to Rs180 since January. This is despite the ongoing crushing season and the industry's commitment to the government not to let retail rates go up beyond Rs140-145 in return for permission to export their excess stocks last year. Instead of holding the manufacturers to their promise, or addressing the underlying structural issues driving the periodic price volatility, the government responded by announcing plans to import raw sugar. The present price hike is not resulting from any shortages in the market. Importing the sweetener and subsidising it at Ramazan bazaars are only temporary and expensive solutions. We cannot address the long-standing issue of sharp periodic price spikes and fluctuations without undertaking comprehensive policy reforms and effective market regulation. It is time the government completely deregulated the sugar trade, and stopped market intervention by fixing cane crop and sugar prices as well as controlling the commodity's import and export. Let the market determine the retail sugar prices, and the margins for manufacturers and traders.

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Genocide resumes

TWO months after a ceasefire temporarily suspended their slaughter, the people of Gaza once again confronted genocidal Israeli violence early on Tuesday. Over 400 Palestinians have been killed in the latest Israeli atrocities, many of them women and children, and chances of the truce's survival are very slim.

Tel Aviv's troops may reportedly return to the devastated Strip, and though Hamas and other armed Palestinian factions have not yet retaliated, if Israel continues its butchery, any chances of a renewed ceasefire will vaporise. After all, the Israeli prime minister has

indicated that the latest phase of violence may be open-ended, and with the US administration firmly backing the slaughter, a return to relative calm seems impossible.

There were always doubts about Israel's sincerity towards long-term peace with the Palestinians in general, and Gaza in particular. While the ceasefire held for two months, in the last few weeks Israel had stopped all aid from entering the Strip. Hamas wanted discussions about a long-term truce and a full Israeli withdrawal, but Tel Aviv insisted all the remaining hostages be released first.

It is safe to say that these were ruses, and Israel was waiting for an excuse to restart the massacre. If it had been serious about the welfare of its hostages, the Israeli government would have taken many earlier chances to stop fighting and bring back its people alive. But the extermination of the Palestinian people seemed to be Tel Aviv's primary objective, one that it has again begun to pursue with vigour as the violence unleashed on Tuesday shows.

Looking ahead, it appears that the Palestinian people will again be left defenceless in the face of merciless brutality. Moreover, the US has begun threatening Palestinian allies, indicating that the conflict may once again spread to the far corners of the Middle East. Over the past few days, Washington had bombed Yemen ostensibly to target the pro-Iran Houthi movement, which had enforced a blockade in the Red Sea before the Gaza ceasefire in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Over 50 people died in the Yemen attacks, including civilians. American President Donald Trump has also threatened to hold Iran responsible for "every shot fired by the Houthis".

It seems that the isolationist MAGA wing has been drowned out by the warmongering neocon and Zionist factions of Mr Trump's support base, and he may be preparing to take his nation into a fresh Middle East conflagration, all in the defence of Israel. While efforts should be made to restore the Gaza ceasefire and calm regional tensions, it appears that Tel Aviv and Washington are not in the mood for peace. Before the ceasefire, a greater Middle East conflict was narrowly averted; this time we may not be so lucky.

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Strength in unity

WILL it count as an opportunity lost? Given the sharp escalation in militant violence in recent weeks, some had hoped that Tuesday's high-level huddle on national security would be followed by a message of hope and unity for those suffering and a resolve to meet the menace of terrorism as one nation. Perhaps one should have foreseen the bitter dynamics of Pakistan's ongoing political crisis precluding this possibility. Major opposition

parties eventually decided to skip the meeting, dimming the prospect of the political leadership presenting a unified front on this occasion. The committee's post-meeting statement, too, revealed that matters had not moved beyond the "need for a national consensus to repel terrorism, [and] emphasising strategic and unified political commitment to confront this menace with the full might of the state". To its credit, the committee chose to leave the door open, noting in its statement that "the committee members [...] regretted the lack of participation by some opposition members and reiterated that the consultation process in this regard would continue". It is hoped that the next attempt to get the civilian leadership on the same page will be more successful.

Meanwhile, both the government and opposition deserve censure. First, the Tehreek Tahaffuz-i-Ayeen-i-Pakistan coalition was wrong to make one person the central issue at a time when the spectre of militancy looms over almost half the country. The points raised by the leaders of the PTI and TTAP might have merited discussion, but they did not justify boycotting this important meeting. Lawmakers represent not just their political party, but also the people of the constituency from where they are elected. That is why, in matters of national import, political allegiances should be left at parliament's door. That said, the government also deserves criticism for not showing more flexibility. The PTI skipped the meeting because it said it was not allowed to consult its founder before the session — a stance its jailed leader reportedly endorsed. While the matter was not about political negotiations, and the PTI could have easily opted to attend a meeting on national security, the government should have made a strong attempt to persuade the disgruntled opposition to participate, instead of criticising it for non-cooperation. After all, it is the government's duty to reach out to even its rivals in the interest of national unity.

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NFC weightage

THE NFC Award has long been in need of an overhaul. The government's proposal to bring down the weightage of population in the distribution mechanism is a welcome one. For too long, the disproportionate emphasis on population size — an overwhelming 82pc of the formula — has incentivised unchecked population growth while no meaningful improvement is witnessed in public welfare, particularly health and education. A more balanced approach, which considers factors such as poverty, revenue generation and regional backwardness, is essential for equitable and sustainable development. Pakistan has one of the world's highest population growth rates at 2.8pc and cannot afford a distribution system that encourages further expansion at the expense of progress. Our dilapidated health infrastructure highlights the failure of our approach. Instead of

reinforcing an outdated model, a revised NFC formula must ensure that resources are allocated where they can yield the greatest impact.

While the need to disincentivise rapid population growth is undeniable, merely adjusting the NFC formula will not curb birth rates. Social determinants such as poverty, illiteracy and inadequate healthcare will need policy interventions. That said, reducing population weightage can impose fiscal discipline on provinces and compel them to expand their revenue base rather than solely relying on federal handouts. Critics may argue that changing the formula represents an attempt by the centre to claw back resources from provinces. However, one must also consider that a recalibrated NFC Award would reduce the financial burden on the centre to play a more effective role in national health and population policy. Moreover, as these pages have previously noted, provinces themselves would be willing to renegotiate provincial-sharing criteria. The desire for adjustment is not the issue. It is the government's reluctance to convene comprehensive NFC talks since 2015. It is time for the centre and provinces to engage in meaningful dialogue to craft a fairer, more efficient resource distribution framework.

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Victim complex

INDIAN Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent comments to an American podcaster regarding the Pakistan-India relationship are detached from reality and reflect a highly selective reading of the history of the nearly eight-decade-old dispute.

While the relationship has been marked by great complexity, with mostly lows and a few highs since partition, Mr Modi painted Pakistan as the villain of the piece, with India the innocent victim of Islamabad's conniving schemes. The reality is quite different. Mistakes have been made by both sides, but in the recent past it has been India that has been resisting Pakistan's overtures for peace. As the Foreign Office put it, the Indian PM's remarks were "misleading and one-sided".

Mr Modi seemed 'hurt' that Pakistan had engaged in a 'proxy war' against his country, and that Islamabad replied to his personal attempts to mend fences with "hostility". Interestingly, while the podcast appeared to be nothing more than an attempt at Pakistan-bashing and reimagining history, the Indian leader offered no way towards peace.

It is clear, therefore, that it is not Pakistan but India that is not interested in harmony in South Asia. This country has been advocating dialogue, while India refuses to even play cricket in Pakistan, as the recent debacle over the Champions Trophy illustrated. Pakistan indeed has its flaws, and mistakes have been made by the state in the past, such as

cement have shown a slight uptick due to a modest rise in exports, and automobiles sales are recovering on a low base effect.

Overall, big industry recorded a negative growth of 1.78pc during the first seven months of the current fiscal year from a year ago. In FY24, LSM had contracted 0.03pc compared to a 0.92pc growth in the preceding year. No doubt there is reason to be worried about the country's declining LSM output. However, we cannot expect big industry to grow when the entire economy is in slow mode, despite the reduced volatility that has created a semblance of stability and slight recovery, supported by IMF funding, over the last one and a half years. Inflation is down but significant risks remain; the current account is in surplus because of a record increase in remittances, but pressures on the external account are re-emerging due to rising imports and weakening foreign private and official capital flows. The recent recovery notwithstanding, Pakistan's economy lacks the strength to walk let alone run. Any push to accelerate industrial growth at the moment would land us into deeper trouble. The only way forward is to shed our old habits of achieving growth through imported consumption, while sticking to a slow-growth mode until the pro-growth reforms agenda is implemented to remove structural issues that are pulling down the industry.

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Education interrupted

THE sudden closure of major universities in Balochistan, ostensibly due to 'security concerns', marks another blow to a student population already living under the shadow of apathy and marginalisation. At the time of writing, the University of Balochistan, Sardar Bahadur Khan Women University, and University of Turbat had suspended on-campus activities indefinitely, leaving thousands of students in academic limbo. The proposed solution — online classes — would be laughable if it were not so tragically disconnected from the reality of Balochistan. In a province where reliable internet access is a luxury rather than a basic utility, how can students participate in online education? The casual assurance that students from areas with connectivity problems will receive 'concessions' fails to address the basic inequity.

These closures follow a disturbing pattern of state indifference towards students. For years, we have witnessed Baloch students from campuses across Pakistan being 'disappeared', their education and lives disrupted under the guise of national security. Now, even within their home province, their right to education faces further erosion. While the violence, including the recent attack on the Jaffar Express, across the province are deeply concerning, the government must address root causes rather than punish innocent

students. Shutting down educational institutions only deepens the alienation and resentment that fuel unrest in the first place. For Balochistan's youth, these closures represent more than just missed lectures. They symbolise the state's continued unwillingness to invest in the province's human capital and future. The state must recognise that genuine security cannot be achieved by sacrificing education. Rather than closing universities, it should address the legitimate grievances of Baloch students while providing adequate security measures that allow campuses to function. Most importantly, any temporary shift to online learning must be accompanied by immediate investments in digital infrastructure across the province. Balochistan's youth deserve the same educational opportunities afforded to students across Pakistan — and the dignity of being treated as citizens whose futures matter.

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Personal priorities

IT has been a pattern. Ever since it returned to power in 2022, the ruling PML-N has allocated tens of billions from public funds each year to the Sustainable Development Goals Achievement Programme, ostensibly to shore up its own and allied parties' sagging political fortunes.

SAP, as the programme is referred to, is the cover given to political development schemes sanctioned and overseen by parliamentarians in their respective constituencies. Such schemes have a long and controversial history and have been criticised as misuse of public resources by lawmakers, who often seek to use them to advance personal aims. Pet projects launched by them have often been found to be poorly conceived, ripe for exploitation and misaligned with the country's overall development priorities.

Despite these concerns, the budget for such projects has been jacked up considerably in recent years. It has also been observed that SAP funds have been utilised to the greatest extent possible even when ministry-run development projects have faced sharp cutbacks.

At a time when the country's economy is sagging, the climate wreaking havoc, and its people doing demonstrably worse each year on social indicators, whatever fiscal space there is for development spending should be utilised wisely and carefully. Regrettably, the government has been acting contrary to these principles. Instead of requiring all development projects to be requisitioned with detailed proposals and feasibility reports, as projects executed at the state level should be, it recently relaxed the rules to ensure that SAP funds are released without too many questions asked of lawmakers. It has now come to light that almost 96pc of SAP funds had been released by end February, within

a few weeks of the SAP allocation being doubled from what was originally budgeted for the ongoing fiscal year. The logic of doing so deserves to be probed.

What makes it doubly problematic is that these disbursements have been made at a time when the country is facing a massive budgetary shortfall and has sharply curtailed spending under various important heads to remain within its means. Seen along with the eye-watering, almost 300pc increase in parliamentarians' salaries approved around the same time, it raises valid concerns about the government's priorities and whether it is managing Pakistan's finances in the best interests of its citizens.

Factor in that legislators' schemes, like much else, are being financed with expensive debt, and one gets an alarming picture of fiscal mismanagement at the highest levels of decision-making. One wonders how this helps the country's case before the various institutions and friendly countries our government keeps turning to for handouts and loans. There was a time when the ruling class would at least worry about the optics of their decisions. Not anymore, it seems.

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Inheritance rights

THE Federal Shariat Court's ruling that it is un-Islamic to deprive a woman of her right to inheritance is a watershed moment in Pakistan's struggle for gender equality. For generations, women across the country have been systematically denied what is rightfully theirs, through coercion, social pressure and outright criminality. Although clear religious injunctions, as well as legal protections exist, numerous exploitative customs rob women of their share in property. The most common of these is haq bakhshwana, where women are forced to sign away their inheritance in favour of male relatives. In order to keep the property within the family, many women are married to their paternal cousins or forced into exchange marriages (watta satta). In extreme cases, women are symbolically 'married' to the Quran to permanently exclude them from any inheritance — an appalling distortion of religious beliefs. Women who insist on claiming their inheritance face threats, social stigma, or even violence. They may be labelled as greedy or disloyal and accused of breaking family ties. Some families sever ties with daughters or sisters who demand their share, making it an emotionally and socially costly battle.

The law, in theory, is clear. The Muslim Personal Law (1961) guarantees women their inheritance, and Section 498-A of the Pakistan Penal Code criminalises depriving women of their property rights. Additionally, the Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act (2020) was passed to facilitate women in reclaiming their inheritance. Yet, these legal provisions remain largely ineffective due to weak enforcement, judicial delays, and

cultural resistance. Now, with the FSC's unequivocal ruling, the state must take concrete steps to enforce these laws. A comprehensive awareness campaign should educate citizens about both the religious validity and legal protection of women's inheritance rights. Law-enforcement agencies must be sensitised to treat instances of inheritance deprivation as criminal cases, rather than private family disputes. The judiciary should establish specialised tribunals to expedite inheritance cases. Government departments should monitor inheritance transfers, especially in areas where exploitative customs are prevalent, to ensure compliance with the law. The FSC's judgement invoking "Amr bil Maroof Wa Nahi Anil Munkar" (enjoining good and forbidding wrong) as a state duty under the Enforcement of Sharia Act is particularly significant. It places responsibility on government institutions to actively protect women's rights rather than remain passive observers.

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Anti-Muslim actions

MUSLIMS in India have endured incessant scrutiny of their nationalism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's determination to impose Hindu-led majoritarianism on his country, which is visible in several instances of communal conflict, exploitation and divisive rhetoric, have placed great strain on the Indian social fabric. The clashes in Nagpur over rumours of desecration at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal protest calling for the tomb of 17th-century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb to be replaced with a memorial for Maratha rulers, confirm that the cycle of hate is strong. Over the last decade, the state's tactics have become predictable with India's political apparatus set on stoking friction through provocative agendas that divert attention from socioeconomic pressures and Mr Modi's governance failures in order to influence electoral sentiments. The fact that the BJP's hate-filled politics and the impression that Hindus are under attack has helped keep the party in power, clearly shows how prejudice poses a grave threat to India's social stability.

India's far-right rulers are once again casting Muslims as descendants of Mughals, and implying that the community should be penalised for past sins. In Mr Modi's rule, the sociopolitical landscape has shifted dramatically; culture, history and religion are intertwined to the extent that films and festivals, such as Eid, Diwali, Holi and Christmas, have been communalised. But as hostilities heighten amid muscular Hindutva rampage, the muted response from the opposition parties and society is troubling. Their collective inability to protect social harmony, diversity and pluralism will bury Nehruvian social justice for good. At a time when calls for Muslim massacres and erasure of monuments and history are issued openly, the oil-rich Muslim fraternity and the global community must put

their money where their mouths are, and stand by Indian Muslims. The deadly mix of fascism and Hindutva, if permitted to continue, will not spare other communities either.

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Running on empty

“WHEN the well is dry, we know the worth of water.” These words by Benjamin Franklin ring especially true for Pakistan today, as the country inches closer to a full-blown water emergency.

Marked each year on March 22, World Water Day should serve to remind the country’s rulers that the water crisis confronting us threatens not only our food security and public health, but the very survival of our future generations. The signs are all around us: near-drought conditions across large swathes of the country, shrinking reservoirs, erratic rainfall patterns, and mounting pressure on an already fragile water management system.

As of mid-March, water levels in Mangla stood at 320m — its minimum operating level — with Tarbela not even 2m above its own dead level. Chashma reservoir too is near depletion. According to Irsa, Sindh is facing a 50pc water shortage, while Punjab is not far behind. The impact on agriculture is already visible. Wheat crops, currently at their final watering stage, are at risk of under-yielding. Sugarcane, vegetables, and fruit orchards — especially mango groves in Sindh’s Nara Canal zone — are parched. Cotton sowing is also being delayed or compromised, jeopardising one of Pakistan’s most vital cash crops. Experts warn that crop shedding, stunted yields, and economic losses are now inevitable unless water becomes available in the coming weeks.

Add to this the accelerating glacier melt in the north and erratic rainfall in the catchment areas, and Pakistan’s future water outlook grows even more precarious. Yet, despite these alarming signals, we continue to squander what little water we have. Outdated irrigation techniques, wasteful crop choices in arid regions, unregulated groundwater extraction, and urban leakage all contribute to the crisis.

Our per capita water availability level, at sub-900 cubic metres, is dangerously close to the threshold of absolute water scarcity. Yet, our water policy remains largely reactive and politically neglected. This situation is no longer just an environmental concern — it is a full-blown national emergency and must be declared as such.

Serious investment needs to be made in modern irrigation systems such as drip sprinkler technologies. Crop zoning must be enforced to curb the cultivation of high water-consuming crops in low-yield regions. The 1991 Water Accord must be fully implemented in both spirit and detail — including new reservoirs, equitable distribution mechanisms,

and environmental protections. At the urban level, water metering, leak detection, and wastewater recycling should be mandatory components of municipal planning. Groundwater extraction must be regulated through permits and pricing to prevent aquifer depletion. On this World Water Day, Pakistan must recognise that its survival depends on how it chooses to manage — or mismanage — what remains of this resource.

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Another ultimatum

THESE are fraught times, but the government must still find it in its heart to be a little more accommodating. Despite concerns, the Foreign Office has issued yet another warning for all Afghan Citizen Card holders and undocumented migrants to leave by the end of this month. The interior ministry has vowed to start mass deportations if they do not do so voluntarily, according to an official notice issued earlier, raising the prospect of another round of forced displacement for an already suffering people. The state's 'hard' stance on foreigners residing in Pakistan without visas was evident in the FO spokesperson's remarks on Thursday, in which he brusquely dismissed the concerns raised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other agencies regarding the mass repatriation of refugees and asylum seekers. Reminding the audience that Pakistan is not a member of the Refugee Convention and that everything it has done for the refugees has been done "voluntarily", he asserted that the Pakistani state considers Afghans to have overstayed their welcome. The state's weariness and wariness is understandable, but it can still show patience.

There are many transit refugees currently in Pakistan who fled after the return of the Taliban regime and have been awaiting visas for various other countries. Instead of dangling the threat of deportation over their necks, Pakistan must approach the diplomatic representatives of these countries and impress upon them that their visa processes must be expedited. Many of these individuals and families could face real harm if sent back to Afghanistan, and there is a moral responsibility to ensure that they get passage to safer countries in time. Likewise, Islamabad should also reconsider how it is treating registered refugees. Many of them have now spent years or even decades in Pakistan, and it seems cruel to punish them for the Taliban regime's failures. The goodwill Pakistan has accumulated over decades for its hospitality towards them should not be erased over a diplomatic issue. That leaves those who have consistently been evading the system while residing in this country. There is sound justification for asking such refugees to leave and return if they wish with a valid visa, but care should still be taken not to injure their dignity. After all these years, there is no reason to give them cause to view Pakistan with hostility.

Muzzled voices

A NEW era of censorship is upon us. The FIA's arrest of journalist and founder of media agency Raftar, Farhan Mallick, apparently for the digital platform's content, is the latest incident that strikes at the heart of freedom of expression. The additional director of the agency's Cybercrime Reporting Centre said that Mr Mallick had been under inquiry for the last three months due to "several programmes against the security establishment". He has been remanded to FIA custody for alleged Peca violations and defamation; the FIR is lodged under many sections of Peca, PPC Section 109 — "punishment of abetment if the act abetted committed in consequence and where no express provision is made for its punishment" — and Section 500 — "punishment for defamation". It states "...the alleged person is involved in generating and disseminating posts and videos related to Anti-State consist of fake news and public incitement agenda..." This detention, which has been condemned by media associations and rights activists, has raised troubling questions about the reasons for false and fake information and the impact of deepening suppression.

The mounting manipulation of the media and digital platforms by a hardened regulatory regime, propelled by the political impulses of unelected elements, erodes integrity, authenticity and authority. Overt and covert ways to freeze honest voices through a draconian law reveal the state's desire to play judge for its own self and decide what 'content' related to it is disingenuous. In doing so, it ends up betraying a discomfort with democratic values. Controversy and criticism from journalists and digital rights activists for ambiguous provisos that enable state interference have stalked Peca since its birth in 2016. Citizens should know that if fundamental freedoms are not fought for, oppression will consume all avenues. Meanwhile, the government must understand that silencing discourse creates a crisis of credibility in traditional media and makes space for unreliable narratives to flourish.

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Judicial disputes

ANOTHER day, another spat within the judiciary. It appears that there is still very little realisation within the institution that the damage that has been and is being caused to its reputation may take many years to reverse.

The most recent development pertains to the reconstitution of an Islamabad High Court tribunal that had been hearing a Judicial Service Appeal filed by a judge against the appointment and subsequent elevation of another judge in the subordinate judiciary.

The tribunal, which included Justices Tariq Mehmood Jahangiri, Babar Sattar and Sardar Ejaz, was reconstituted on March 18 by President Asif Ali Zardari on the advice of acting IHC Chief Justice Sardar Muhammad Sarfaraz Dogar, reportedly after it had already arrived at a decision on the petition before it. The tribunal has now issued its judgement disregarding the reconstitution order, ruling that the law does not allow that the IHC and its subordinate judiciary be filled with judges borrowed from other courts.

Ordering the IHC registrar “to return all members presently serving in the subordinate judiciary for Islamabad Capital Territory on deputation within six months”, the tribunal has observed that, “any decision by the chief justice or a committee appointed by the chief justice that is not in accordance with the requirements of the law is not sustainable in the eyes of law, including decisions with regard to an appointment on deputations, induction, or promotion, and is liable to be set aside by this tribunal”.

Not only that, but the tribunal has held that neither the president nor the acting chief justice had any authority to reconstitute it without legal justification. It has held the appointment of various deputed judges as unlawful, declared the reconstitution of the tribunal as ‘unconstitutional’ and underlined that the IHC acting chief justice has no authority to interfere with the tribunal’s functions.

Ever since the controversial 26th Amendment, it has been observed that the judiciary has been having considerable difficulty functioning ‘normally’ due to the slew of changes to its operational structure and the government’s expanded role in its internal affairs. It may be recalled that a similar dispute previously arose in the Supreme Court, when an important case was abruptly moved from one bench to another against judicial norms, ostensibly in anticipation of an adverse ruling.

Public perceptions of the institution’s independence and neutrality have taken a hit due to the bitter and often very public spats between senior judges, which continue to signal considerable dissatisfaction within the institution regarding how it is being conducted. This latest dispute, too, will soon land before the Supreme Court, where one can, with quite a bit of surety, expect it to stir further controversy. The judiciary’s fall has been tragic, but only the institution can save itself.

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Biased proposal

PAKISTAN'S tax system is extortionist, unpredictable and unsupportive of investment and economic growth. It disproportionately taxes documented businesses and individuals, and spares those who choose not to become part of the documented economy. If they can help it, a host of businesses and individuals prefer to operate outside the ambit of the formal economy citing steep consumption and personal tax rates and large-scale extortion by a corrupt tax machinery. Little wonder that the FBR's real tax per capita has grown by only 0.3pc from 2018 to 2024, and that Pakistan's 10pc tax-to-GDP ratio is one of the lowest in the world and the region.

A business lobby group has recently called for a revamp of Pakistan's taxation system to rev up business activities and create jobs in the country. It also urged the government to execute structural reforms for boosting tax revenues. At the same time, however, the tax proposals that the Pakistan Business Forum has put forward for inclusion in the next fiscal year show a bias for the largely tax-exempted real estate and trading sectors, including retailers and commercial importers. Besides a reduction in the consumption tax rates and elimination of the super tax, the group has suggested the imposition of a paltry fixed tax of Rs20,000 on large and Rs10,000 on smaller traders to expand the tax base by making it convenient for them to pay their tax liability. However, it has not explained how this proposal fits into the larger scheme of structural reforms to increase the extremely narrow base, least of all a reduction in the higher tax rates. Currently, the FBR estimates that the tax gap — the amount that remains uncollected due to non-compliance of tax laws — has soared to Rs7.1tr. Add to this the huge tax expenditure of nearly Rs4tr and the stage is set for an increased burden on documented businesses and individuals through innovative levies like super tax, a charge initially imposed to finance the rehabilitation of communities displaced during the military operation against militants in KP a decade ago. It has since been made a permanent source of revenue by expanding its scope to include all businesses and individuals earning over Rs150m. While the tax rates must be slashed to ease the burden on compliant persons, this does not justify demands for special treatment being given to certain sectors.

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JFK files

THE latest cache of declassified documents from what are known as the ‘Kennedy files’ have not really impressed the small global community of assassination buffs, or, for that matter, the considerably larger community of conspiracy theorists. What they do seem to have done, though, is to offer a rare glimpse into the workings of the CIA and its activities around the world. The release of over 60,000 documents related to the assassination of John F. Kennedy this past Tuesday had kicked off a global race to uncover new information that could help shed light on the popular American president’s mysterious and quite public murder during a rally in November 1963. As it turns out, the truth about the files seems to be much stranger than the fictions conjured up about it. As one article in the New York Times recently pointed out, the decades of secrecy around the Kennedy files may have had to do with the fact that they were hiding CIA secrets and not, as conspiracy theorists long believed, a second gunman.

“This is a big one,” US President Donald Trump had said while teasing their release, “Everything will be revealed.” As with much about Mr Trump, that proved nothing but, to put it politely, a load of rubbish. Instead, his administration, likely inadvertently, has lifted the veil off one of the most notorious entities in the world, evidence of whose misdeeds are peppered throughout the pages. There are references to the CIA overstepping its mandate, conducting illegal surveillance, attempting coups, interfering in elections, poisoning Cuban sugar, attacking Chinese nuclear facilities, and just generally behaving exactly like overseas conspiracy theorists have long accused it of behaving. There could be more to follow, with classified files on the assassination of another longtime target of American intelligence agencies, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, to be released soon. As the empire unravels, one might as well enjoy the spectacle.

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Climate action

PAKISTAN’S climate challenge is enormous. Despite contributing less than 1pc to GHG emissions, the country is among the nations most vulnerable to the impact of climate change. In fact, the Global Climate Risk Index lists Pakistan as the world’s fifth most climate-vulnerable country.

The massive floods of 2022 that killed hundreds, displaced millions, and inflicted economic losses in tens of billions of dollars, besides increasing food insecurity, highlighted the kind of existential threat the cash-starved Pakistani economy must fight off to survive. As if the periodic extreme weather events, ranging from heatwaves to

TB burden

AS the world observes World Tuberculosis Day, we confront the sombre fact that despite being both preventable and curable, the disease continues to claim over a million lives each year. TB is a contagious bacterial infection which most commonly affects the lungs but can also spread to the brain, kidneys and bones. In 2023, the WHO estimated that 10.8m people fell ill with TB and 1.25m people died. Multidrug-resistant TB — which does not respond to the two most powerful TB drugs — has emerged as a global health security threat, with only two in five patients receiving appropriate treatment. The disease disproportionately affects low- and middle-income countries and is fuelled by risk factors such as undernutrition, smoking, diabetes and HIV. Although some progress has been made globally — with over 79m lives saved through TB efforts since 2000 — the WHO warns that progress is now at risk. A severe drop in funding has disrupted diagnostics, human resource deployment, data systems, and medicine supply chains. In 2023, only 26pc of the \$22bn required for global TB care was available. TB research also remains underfunded, with just one-fifth of the \$5bn target achieved in 2022.

Pakistan's situation is deeply worrying. According to the World TB Report 2024, it accounted for 6.3pc of the global TB burden in 2023, ranking it among the countries with the highest number of cases. It also contributed nearly 8pc to the global gap between estimated TB incidence and the number of people who were actually diagnosed and reported — highlighting critical challenges in case detection. Furthermore, Pakistan is among the 10 countries with the widest gaps in access to MDR-TB treatment, which suggests major shortcomings in diagnosis, reporting and treatment rollout. Decades of underinvestment in public health have left our TB control programme reliant on donor support. This must change. Pakistan must increase domestic investment in TB diagnosis, treatment and research, expand coverage of WHO-recommended rapid diagnostics, improve reporting and surveillance mechanisms, and scale up access to shorter all-oral MDR-TB treatment regimens such as BPaLM. The country also needs to integrate TB care with broader primary and lung health services — especially given the overlapping risks posed by diabetes, undernutrition and pollution. The WHO has called on all governments to 'Commit. Invest. Deliver'. Pakistan must heed that call — and make TB elimination a health priority.

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Unsafe passages

WRETCHED social conditions add an extra layer of cruelty to ordinary lives. The UN's migration agency says that "at least 8,938 people died on migration routes worldwide in 2024", making it the fifth year that numbers hit record highs and the deadliest one for migrants — almost 9,000 lives lost globally in preventable tragedies. The statistics are, in all likelihood, much higher as scores of deaths and disappearances remain undocumented. The fatalities were highest for Asia, Africa and Europe in 2024: "2,778, 2,242, and 233 respectively", with 2,452 people perishing in the waters of the Mediterranean, a prime passage to Europe for the desperate. In Pakistan, a national crackdown was announced following the Greek boat tragedy last year, but a few arrests and dismissals was all it took for the government's fury to fade. These actions were cosmetic at best because the central challenge lies in fighting a deep-rooted culture of corruption and impunity, which permits trafficking networks to operate freely; they keep official palms greased to evade justice.

Subsisting on a bare minimum of resources in times when the average person's standard of living has fallen significantly, migrants, often poor and marginalised, are easily deceived about the perils these journeys entail. In the quest for a better life, they face abuse and are packed like sardines into unhygienic quarters as they pass through countries that flout international humanitarian laws by shirking all responsibility; even their law-enforcement does not protect them. To alter the gaze on migrants, the narrative has to change: they are victims and not offenders. While recent cases of human traders manipulating air routes to hold migrants for ransom highlight the growth in their range of methods, joblessness, the absence of education and poverty create a sense that happiness and stability can be found in another land. The battle is to ensure that these emotions are solely for home.

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Shortcut tactics

THE IMF is reported to have blocked a government move to 'substantially' slash retail electricity prices, pre-empting the announcement of the cut the prime minister was supposed to have made in his Pakistan Day address. Resultantly, consumers, particularly low-middle-income households battered by runaway inflation, were not only denied the promised relief of Rs8 per unit of electricity, they have been further burdened with a per litre increase of Rs10 in the petroleum levy.

A report in this paper says that a plan was shared with the IMF staff mission, during the recently concluded performance review of the Fund's \$7bn loan, for an approximately Rs2 per unit tariff reduction on account of 'savings' from the revision of power purchase contracts with a group of selected IPPs. As an afterthought, the authorities had increased the petroleum levy to a maximum of Rs70 to divert the additional revenues to maximise relief in power tariffs.

That the lender is reviewing, if not making, crucial decisions shows how much this country has come to rely on it for loans, thanks to decades of bad policy choices and elite greed. True, this kind of 'oversight' by a global lender appears to be intrusive, and impinges on sovereignty. But in the context of states where ruling elites habitually ditch reforms to make politically motivated, selfish policy choices for their own economic and financial benefit, it may be a necessary compromise.

On the face of it, the IMF's decision to veto the move to reduce retail power tariffs seems to be against the interests of middle-class consumers whose electricity bills have outpaced their home rental rates following the 18pc increase last July as a prior action for agreement with the lender for its support to the wobbly economy. The IMF has not only blocked the tariff reduction move; it has also stopped policymakers from cutting federal transaction taxes on real estate, which the government is desperate to implement to please the powerful property tycoons.

The base prices of electricity have risen by more than 150pc since 2021. We have expensive electricity because of several factors, including but not limited to transmission and distribution inefficiencies, power theft, rampant corruption in and mismanagement of distribution companies, over-dependence on imported fossil fuels for generation, the absence of a competitive energy market, low penetration of renewable solar and wind energy and unviable power purchase agreements. While the government's effort to reduce power prices is commendable given the impact on the public and small businesses, the attempts to slash one burden and increase the other is not a sound policy choice. Long-term, sustainable tariff reduction demands that policymakers address the deep-seated structural issues plaguing the power sector rather than finding shortcuts to please the electorate for political gains.

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Unforced error

THE state is understandably keen on neutralising the threat posed by various militant and terrorist outfits, but it must be careful that it does not end up antagonising the civilian population in the process.

As the situation in Balochistan slowly spirals out of control, there is a need to realise that years of bad policies have led to the recent security failures in the province. Blunt tools like lawfare and police brutality cannot address the province's myriad challenges.

In his March 23 speech, President Asif Ali Zardari noted that the objective behind the creation of Pakistan was to establish a welfare state based on the principles of equality, justice and the rule of law. It is these principles that must be evident as the state strategises how it must defeat those who do not believe in the idea of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, recent actions show that the authorities are far from the right track. The decision to arrest and book Dr Mahrang Baloch, chief organiser of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee, along with 150 others on serious charges is unreasonable and will only stoke further trouble.

The BYC has now become a provincial phenomenon because its message of nonviolent but persistent protest has resonated well among ordinary people tired of state excesses. The movement has been led by women in a province where women have traditionally been confined to very limited spaces in society. This is quite extraordinary and should have been taken seriously from the start as a sign of the Baloch people's commitment to fighting for their rights without resorting to violent means.

Instead, the state continued to treat the BYC with contempt, and it has now charged its leadership with terrorism, murder, incitement to rebellion and promoting racial hatred, among other things, over one admittedly ill-advised protest.

From the Baloch perspective, does this not reinforce the perception that no matter what they do, they will be treated as antagonists by the state? Does this not play right into the hands of those who want to see Balochistan isolated, and its people alienated from the rest of the country?

The state must not push ordinary citizens away with its excesses. It must not let terrorists provoke it into making bigger mistakes. The fight against militancy needs to be won in hearts and minds as well.

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TTP and Baloch separatists. Moreover, border disputes have severely strained relations, with the Torkham crossing closed for nearly a month. It has reopened temporarily until April 15.

During his Kabul trip, Mr Sadiq met with the Afghan Taliban's foreign and trade ministers, which indicates that the Afghan side may be serious about mending ties. It is a fact that transit and trade are of great importance for landlocked Afghanistan, and prolonged border closures and disputes have a debilitating effect on that country's economy. Therefore, talks need to continue in order to address all irritants affecting relations.

For the Pakistani side, security is paramount, while for the Afghans, trade is crucial. Therefore, Islamabad should continue to emphasise that the presence of anti-Pakistan militants on Afghan soil stands in the way of normal commercial ties. The Afghan Taliban need to take action against these forces, or ensure that they are not in a position to harm Pakistan. The Taliban insist there is no militancy problem at their end, but facts suggest otherwise.

It is hoped that these parleys continue and both sides, particularly Kabul, commit to peace and amity. A nation cannot alter its geography, which is why Pakistan must maintain good relations with Afghanistan. In the recent past, ties have been marked by much bitterness, and both sides have exchanged fire at the border.

The fact is that Pakistan cannot afford a hostile regime in Afghanistan, as this has severe internal security implications for this country. For their part, the Taliban know that frosty ties with Pakistan will affect their commercial and trade interests, as well as their efforts to gain greater international recognition. Though it may sound transactional, Pakistan can indicate that unrestrained trade ties are contingent upon Kabul's efforts to ensure no malign actors are able to target Pakistan from Afghan soil.

A lasting agreement is also required to help resolve border disputes, as closures take a heavy humanitarian toll, and affect local businesses on both sides. Better bilateral ties are possible if both sides sustain dialogue, and if there is recognition of each other's key demands, particularly Pakistan's concerns about cross-border terrorism.

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Drought warning

DRIVEN by rising temperatures linked to climate change, increasing drought events across Pakistan have affected tens of millions of people and devastated agriculture in recent years, forcing many rural communities to migrate. Over time, drought conditions have worsened, becoming warmer and drier, and are affecting much larger areas, especially in Balochistan and Sindh. The Met Office has again issued a drought alert for different parts of Sindh, southern Balochistan and lower eastern Punjab due to scanty rainfall — 40pc below normal since September. Even though the recent rain spells have brought some relief in parts of the country, several southern regions in Sindh and Balochistan have experienced more than 200 consecutive dry days. The below-normal rain means that the country experienced an increase of 2°C to 3°C in its normal mean temperatures, which has intensified drought conditions in the affected areas. The Tarbela and Mangla dams have already hit dead level, while water flowing in various rivers is at an extremely low level. With the immediate water availability outlook in the country looking bleaker at the moment, the rise in temperatures is likely to increase water demand for the new Kharif season.

The growing water stress linked to climate change is also posing a major threat to Pakistan's food security, particularly in areas that already suffer from high levels of poverty and hunger. The situation calls for structural reforms in the water sector if Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif wants to help the farm sector achieve food self-sufficiency and enhance agricultural exports. Without making the water sector the centre of its agriculture and food security policies, the country cannot hope to become food sufficient, let alone increase its farm exports. Though successive governments have talked about measures to boost Pakistan's water security, none has ever taken concrete policy measures to translate this rhetoric into action. There is a reason for the lack of action on water sector reforms; our policymakers often equate water security with the construction of mega dams and canals. The era of building dams is already over. The world is now using technology to reduce water usage for irrigation and exploring cost-effective localised solutions such as harvesting rainwater to help communities meet their needs in times of drought. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events caused by climate change calls for 'thinking local, small and smart'.

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Deadly roads

DESPITE daytime restrictions on heavy vehicles, Karachi continues to witness one horrific traffic accident after another. On Monday, a young couple — a 25-year-old man and his 19-year-old pregnant wife — were crushed to death when a speeding water tanker crashed into them on Sharea Faisal. The would-be parents were killed on the spot, with their then-delivered baby also not surviving. An investigation by the Karachi Road Accident Analysis Team revealed that the fully-loaded, high-speeding tanker mounted the central footpath and broke through onto the opposite lane where the couple were on their way for a check-up. Mechanical inspection contradicted the driver's initial claim of brake failure; instead, fatigue and reckless driving were cited as probable causes. The driver had reportedly been working a gruelling 24-hour shift. In just 83 days this year, heavy vehicles have claimed 68 lives in Karachi — 24 from trailers, 17 from dumpers, and 14 from water tankers. Overall, 216 people have perished on our roads.

The government's recent curbs, limiting heavy vehicle movement to nighttime hours and mandating fitness certificates have proven inadequate. The basic issue remains lax enforcement coupled with a profit-driven transport system that values delivery speed over human life. Preventing further accidents means urgent reform. The government must create an independent transportation safety authority with prosecution powers and protection from political interference. Electronic monitoring systems should be implemented for all commercial vehicles to track speed, location and driver hours. Strict mandatory rest periods between shifts, with criminal penalties for companies that impose dangerous schedules, are essential. Safety equipment must be upgraded, including under-run protection, enhanced braking systems and driver assistance technology. The city needs dedicated heavy transport corridors physically separated from other traffic, along with regular roadside inspection points with authority to immediately impound unsafe vehicles. Until we prioritise human lives over commercial convenience, Karachi's roads will continue to be killing fields.

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investments, and building resilience against climate change challenges may prove counterproductive.

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Time to talk

IN an encouraging development, the government has signalled openness to PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's offer to mediate between the ruling coalition and the PTI to facilitate the latter's participation in another session of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security. The PTI was notably absent from the previous meeting — held amid a surge in terrorist violence, including the hijacking of the Jaffar Express in Balochistan — citing the incarceration of its party founder as justification. That meeting, also attended by the military leadership, was meant to forge political unity on the urgent matter of countering militancy. Its effectiveness, however, was blunted by the absence of the country's largest opposition party. Mr Bhutto-Zardari's attempt to rise above partisan interests and invite all political forces to the table is appreciable. His call for setting aside differences in the national interest recognises the seriousness of the situation: Pakistan is once again facing coordinated attacks on civilians and law enforcement, especially in KP and Balochistan. He rightly noted that consensus-building has become increasingly difficult — but remains essential if the state is to marshal its resources effectively against the threat of terrorism. The recent spate of attacks highlights the reality that fragmented political responses only embolden terrorist elements seeking to exploit national divisions.

It is welcome that the government has responded positively to his initiative. Dialogue is not a concession in this context; it is a democratic responsibility. The PTI, for its part, must now reflect seriously on the costs of continued disengagement. National security cannot be made hostage to intra-party considerations. In boycotting the previous session, the PTI put personality politics ahead of the national interest — a misstep that must not be repeated. Elected representatives are duty-bound to put their constituents' safety above political strategy. It is also worth remembering that effective counterterrorism policy requires political ownership. Without consensus, implementation remains weak and short-lived. The meeting must not be symbolic: it should produce concrete understandings on how to secure vulnerable regions and address the drivers of militancy. Mr Bhutto-Zardari's offer is a reminder that consensus is still possible — if all sides show political maturity. The PTI must step up. If there is to be a united front against terrorism, then this renewed opportunity to talk must not be squandered.

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Black Sea truce

WHILE the Trump administration may have no problem with Israel renewing its rampage in Gaza, it is playing peacemaker in the Ukraine conflict. American officials had been meeting their Ukrainian and Russian counterparts in Riyadh over the past few days, and on Tuesday, a naval ceasefire in the Black Sea was announced. Efforts to revive an earlier commitment by Kyiv and Moscow not to hit each other's energy infrastructure were also endorsed. Washington was basically passing messages back and forth between Moscow and Kyiv in the hopes of securing a temporary ceasefire. But even as peace talks were underway in the Saudi capital, Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to trade fire. No miracles were expected from the parleys in Riyadh, and the present outcome appears to be merely a fragile baby step towards peace.

The fact is that with the change of guard in Washington, Ukraine has lost its major benefactor and financier. While the Biden administration portrayed Kyiv's battle against Moscow as a grand, almost cosmic duel between the 'noble' forces of democracy against the 'dark' encroaching forces of authoritarianism, Donald Trump harbours no such illusions. The way the US president and vice-president humiliated the Ukrainian president in the White House last month is an apt illustration of Mr Trump's feelings about Kyiv's current leadership. Also, digressing from his predecessor's approach, Mr Trump has opened lines of communication with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The cards, therefore, are very much stacked against Ukraine, as the US is no longer interested in bankrolling the war, while Europe is in no position to finance or arm Kyiv. Morally, Russia should withdraw from Ukraine while Kyiv must assure Moscow that it will not be playing the role of Nato's sidekick in an endeavour to encircle Russia. Unfortunately, the trust deficit between Kyiv and Moscow is huge, and despite the US-backed diplomatic push in Riyadh, peace is unlikely unless both parties make significant concessions.

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Fear tactics

TO say that the media fraternity's worst fears are now coming true would be to suggest that there was a chance that they would not. This was simply never true. From the beginning, it had been clear that the recent Peca amendments, pushed hastily through parliament late January despite vociferous protests and dutifully signed by the president shortly thereafter, were aimed at critical voices in the media.

What the fraternity has experienced over the past week in both Karachi and Islamabad is simply the law fulfilling its intended purpose. The regime now has legal cover to bully and

harass working journalists for taking adversarial positions, and it has made it a point to turn it into a spectacle that can be cheered on and gloated over on social and mainstream media by its own supporters, as well as provide a demonstrative 'lesson' to those who still cling too tightly to their principles.

The highhandedness with which Farhan Mallick from Karachi and Waheed Murad from Islamabad have been treated over the past few days seems to be a message to the entire media community: fall in line, or else. It matters little what wrong they have committed or whether the charges against them will even stand in a court of law. One could safely presume that these likely do not matter to the authorities either. With the judiciary either unwilling or unable to uphold the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty', the legal process that these two journalists will be put through will be punishment enough. In the hands of the state, their ordeal will become the price they pay for the critical views both have previously expressed in public.

Meanwhile, a journalist in Sahiwal faces Peca charges for defaming a lawyer after allegedly misreporting the circumstances of the latter's removal from a position. In Lakki Marwat, a citizen has been booked under Peca for using "inappropriate language" against Bannu's ulema for not announcing the moon sighting for Ramazan a day earlier. Model-turned-actor Nadia Hussain faces Peca charges for going public with the fact that she was approached for a bribe by a person claiming to be the director of FIA's Karachi Zone. YouTuber Rajab Butt will be tried for Peca violations for giving his perfume a controversial name, while Mardan police are hunting for a local for using abusive language and spreading "negative propaganda" against the local press club.

This is the post-Peca amendments Pakistan that the state wants its citizenry to come to terms with. However, despite the intimidation and fear tactics, activists and the media fraternity must not give up. Ongoing efforts to challenge and repeal this black law must not falter. The courts hearing challenges to Peca amendments must be pressed into taking them up urgently.

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Hints of hope

PAKISTAN'S economic growth has slowed in the second quarter of the ongoing fiscal year from a year ago as the modest increase in the agriculture and services sectors was largely offset by contraction in big industry output. Overall, GDP accelerated by 1.73pc during the October-December period, marking a slight decline from the 1.77pc recorded in the same period last year. The modest growth in the size of the economy is, however, slightly faster than in the first quarter of the current fiscal. This is in spite of the upward revision in the provisional estimates for the first quarter from 0.92pc to 1.34pc, according to the National Accounts Committee. Deceleration in the growth rate does not come as a surprise in the midst of falling public and private investments and shrinking domestic consumption on the back of higher borrowing costs, dollar liquidity crunch driving unannounced import curbs, and the shrinking purchasing power of middle-class consumers. Nevertheless, the slower GDP growth is in line with the State Bank's projection of a 2.5-3.5pc expansion in the size of the economy during FY25. The Asian Development Bank has projected a 3pc increase in Pakistan's GDP and the IMF 3.2pc.

Indeed, the economy has come a long way from the brink of default in the past 18 months as pointed out by the IMF mission chief in his statement on the finalisation of the staff-level agreement with Pakistan over the first review of its current Extended Fund Facility of \$7bn. Macro indicators are in far better shape today and the markets that were gripped by volatility until a year and a half ago have stabilised. Inflation has declined to its lowest level since 2015, financial conditions have improved, sovereign spreads have narrowed significantly, and external balances are stronger, the IMF notes. Yet growth recovery remains weak and is unlikely to pick up pace anytime soon due to structural issues — entrenched by decades of wrong policy choices — that the economy confronts. Any push for faster growth is bound to lead us back into another bigger crisis. The emerging geopolitical challenges marked by the tightening of global financial conditions and rising protectionism are other reasons the country should stay the course of stabilisation by implementing policy reforms and avoiding the temptation to pursue rapid growth. Once the economy finds a solid footing for itself, rapid growth will follow automatically.

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Capacity issues

TALK about disjointed development. Pakistan is now producing high-speed train coaches for its low-speed tracks. According to a recent news report, the Islamabad Carriage Factory, which locally produces locomotives and coaches, is set to deliver its first batch of advanced, 'new generation' passenger coaches in about three months. These coaches, which can go as fast as 200km per hour and are equipped with some state-of-the-art features, have been developed with the help of our Chinese brethren, who themselves boast some of the most advanced railway technology in the world. But, impressive as the achievement is, it will do little to make travel more convenient for Pakistan Railways passengers because our rail network simply does not support trains going as fast as that.

For a rough idea of how much of a disappointment this is, take the current travel times between two of Pakistan's busiest railway stations, Karachi Cantonment and Lahore Junction. A train trip from one to the other, which spans roughly 1,200km, usually takes anywhere from 18 to 24 hours, depending on the service that day. If Pakistan Railways also had tracks and locomotives that were compatible with the new coaches, that travel time could theoretically be cut at least in half, making it so much more convenient for routine travellers and also enhancing the appeal of train trips as a relatively safer, convenient and far more affordable option for all manner of travellers. Unfortunately, the development of railway capacity to facilitate ordinary travellers does not seem to have been a priority for Pakistan. One cannot help but envy China in this regard. The Beijing-Shanghai high-speed railway covers more distance than the Karachi to Lahore track but takes as little as 4.5 hours to traverse. If only our politicians could get over their obsession with shiny motorway projects that carry their nameplates, perhaps ordinary travellers too could hope for such cheap, convenient and quick train journeys.

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New CEC?

CHIEF Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja has completed his five-year term. It is high time for another to take his stead.

Given the scandals and controversies that rocked Mr Raja's institution during the most consequential phase of his tenure, a respectable departure is surely more than he could have hoped for.

There were repeated calls for his resignation or termination following the 2024 general election, yet he somehow managed to stick it out till the end of his tenure. But it seems

that was not good enough for the ruling regime, which clearly intended to keep him in charge of the ECP well beyond his scheduled retirement.

Passed late last year, the controversial 26th Amendment included a clause allowing election commissioners to continue in office till their replacements are decided. Two months since Mr Raja's scheduled retirement, that long-drawn-out process has yet to start. The intent appears to be to delay it as long as possible.

Meanwhile, there are rumours swirling in Islamabad that Mr Raja may be reappointed to his office. If so, that would add more controversies to his record. The country's opposition parties accuse him of abusing his powers to subvert the political system and deny the people's mandate. Mr Raja has also earned a special mention in law history books for outright defying the country's Supreme Court and violating its laws; not once or twice, but on multiple occasions, as recorded in biting judgements issued by various courts of law.

If, despite all this, he is still being considered for another term, the appointment is bound to become controversial. The opposition leaders in both the National Assembly and the Senate seem to have had enough of the waiting. They petitioned the Islamabad High Court earlier this week, challenging the delay in Mr Raja's overdue departure. One must wait and see what the court makes of it.

The ruling parties should avoid getting involved in another controversy around the Election Commission. As it is, managing public perceptions of the incumbent government's legitimacy is one of its biggest challenges. If the idea is to continue demonstrating that 'power is power', they will never be able to win over dissatisfied citizens.

Given the enormity of challenges before them and the country's mounting security concerns, it would be wise to avoid situations that further polarise the public, and instead, to start implementing long-term solutions to perennial political problems. Foremost among such solutions should be the decision to strengthen the institutions of the state and allow them to operate independently and on consensually agreed principles.

The policies currently in vogue are dangerous and will have devastating long-term consequences. The country's political crisis needs an end, not extension after extension. Well-meaning observers have consistently pointed this out to those making the decisions.

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Balochistan violence

BLOODSHED begets bloodshed. Hatred leads to more hatred. But how long can the state allow this unending cycle of violence in Balochistan to continue?

The recent spate of unrest, including the ethnic targeting of passengers in Gwadar, demands unequivocal condemnation. Poor labourers and travellers — often the sole breadwinners of their families — are being targeted for no reason other than their ethnicity. To kill in the name of nationalist ‘resistance’ is morally indefensible.

Balochistan has long been neglected by the state — politically, economically and socially. The sense of alienation is real, and the frustration of its disenfranchised people is fuelled by genuine grievances. But for militant groups to turn this pain into a justification for ethnic violence is nothing short of evil. Those who carry out such acts of terrorism are murderers, plain and simple. There can be no tolerance for the elements who stoke racial hatred.

That said, it is high time the mainstream political parties admitted their failure to engage Balochistan meaningfully. Far too often, Baloch nationalist parties are dismissed as ‘anti-national’ or painted with the same brush as terrorist groups. This approach is counterproductive, it isolates moderate Baloch voices and feeds into the extremist narrative. National parties must listen, engage, and share power in ways that are both just and inclusive.

At the same time, the provincial leadership must ask itself what it has done to uplift the people it claims to represent. Governance remains abysmal, even when elected Baloch leaders are at the helm. They, too, must own their responsibility and do more to provide services, jobs and a future for their youth — before militancy becomes the only path that desperate young men see ahead.

Moreover, Baloch nationalist groups must condemn such heinous acts where non-Baloch workers are singled out and murdered in cold blood. The National Action Plan envisions a comprehensive strategy to end terrorism in all its forms. A key component of NAP is the ‘Balochistan Reconciliation Process’ which, it is hoped, aims to bring disaffected groups into the mainstream.

Provincial ministers have expressed their openness to dialogue. For peace in Balochistan, all stakeholders — the state, political parties and civil society — must act jointly to implement NAP in letter and spirit.

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Turkiye protests

DAILY protests have continued in Turkiye since the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu on March 19. While the government says it is simply following legal procedures, protesters and activists feel the mayor has been hauled up on trumped-up charges, as he poses a major electoral threat to the ruling AK Party. Mr Imamoglu, who belongs to the opposition CHP, has been detained on corruption charges, which he rejects, terming them “slander”. Thousands have been coming out daily across the country, but mainly in Istanbul, as the mayor’s arrest has charged up opponents of the ruling party, who say the economic situation has worsened and freedoms have been curtailed under the AKP’s rule. The ruling party has been in power for over two decades. President Recep Erdogan, meanwhile, has dismissed the protests as “street terror”. Nearly 1,900 people have been rounded up, including some journalists, while the Turkiye head of RSF has said the authorities are not letting the media report freely.

The current protests are the biggest Turkiye has seen since the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations. The Turkish state needs to reassure its citizens as well as the international community that Mr Imamoglu will be able to defend himself fully in court, and that this is not a witch-hunt. While many have accused the AKP of increasingly authoritarian tendencies, the ruling party must ensure that the democratic process continues unhindered in Turkiye. The country has seen numerous military interventions in the past decades — the last coup attempt occurring in 2016 — and Mr Erdogan himself was arrested in 1999 as Istanbul mayor for reading a poem. All sections of the Turkish political spectrum — Islamists, secularists and others — must work within the bounds of the democratic process, and preserve the country’s hard-earned freedoms. Most of all, the constitutional order must be respected so that any adventurers thinking of subverting the political process are stopped in their tracks.

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Hard habits

FEELING the heat, the ruling elite has rolled out some big guns for the fight against national fragility.

This week, the high-powered ‘Harden the State Committee’, which counts among its members two federal secretaries, the FBR chairman, and representatives of all the top civil and military intelligence agencies, convened to brainstorm, among other things, strategies to curb the export of beggars to the Gulf.

Just a few days later, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif chaired another high-level meeting, this one attended by representatives of the information ministries of all four provinces and Azad Kashmir, to discuss how TV dramas and films may be used to enlighten the general public about the ills of terrorism and extremism.

That such issues are now on the agenda of these high-powered committees shows that the state is at least serious about achieving a more adequate level of hardness. But is all this necessary?

Can ideas like state-produced TV dramas and films really contribute towards building national narratives in this day and age? Admittedly, our media industry has a few examples of state-sponsored productions attaining immense public popularity. Some of these dramas, in their heyday, were even able to evoke much patriotic fervour among ordinary citizens. However, the last of such nationally popular productions was released in the 1990s, when there were no smartphones and content-streaming platforms, and when the family television set was all there was for evening entertainment. These days, TV and film products compete in a globalised market, where production values often overshadow the script and where a massive variety of content is always available to distract audiences. Dramas and films cost a fortune to produce and are more often than not misses rather than hits. What, then, is the regime thinking? Can we really afford such undertakings given Pakistan's present state of finances?

Our energies would be better spent elsewhere. The fundamental 'whys' of our myriad problems are well known. The solutions to them are also obvious. The only thing required is for the state to acknowledge its mistakes and correct course.

Instead, we continue to see individuals and institutions transgressing into unrelated domains, which creates bigger problems out of small ones. For example, a high-level committee comprising some of the top intelligence officials should have more important things on its agenda than curbing international begging. That is a job best left to the police. Likewise, politicians need not concern themselves with producing TV dramas. Their job is to ensure that social pressures do not build to the point where problems like militancy and terrorism become a national headache. It is routine interference like this that has not let our state harden sufficiently.

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Dreams of gold

PROSPECTS of the Reko Diq project taking off soon seem to have brightened lately following the completion of the updated feasibility report by the OGDCL. The study edges up project financing costs by 58pc to \$6.8bn from previous estimates on account of inflation, enhanced project capacity, energy mix, alternative water supply options, and updated processing plants and machinery. However, with authorities here having already approved the increase in their contributions to the financing costs, the miner, Barrick Gold, is said to be well on track to start production in 2028 with an initial ore processing capacity of 45m tonnes per annum, followed by an expansion to 90m tonnes from 2034 onwards. For now, the successful closing of a \$3bn limited recourse project financing facility and deteriorating security conditions appear to be the only 'hitches' in the development of the world's largest 'undeveloped' copper-gold deposits in Balochistan's Chagai district.

The project, which has undergone multiple ownership changes over three decades without delivering even an ounce of copper or gold, is of huge importance for both Balochistan and the country's struggling economy. Barrick estimates that the project will deliver an internal rate of return of 21.32pc, generating \$90bn in operating cash flow and \$70bn in free cash flow (on a 100pc basis) based on a three-year trailing average copper price of \$4.03 per pound and gold price of \$2,045 per ounce over the mine's 37-year life. It will generate \$54bn in revenue within Pakistan. Barrick believes that the mine's life could be extended through upgrades and expansions, which, hopefully, would generate more revenues for shareholders. Though the project feasibility study released earlier this year and the one published by OGDCL last week support the public disclosure of mineral resources and reserve estimates, concerns over the transparency of revenues to be generated remain. Many experts have said that the real, long-term benefits of the project can only be realised by the country in general and Balochistan in particular if a fully transparent system is in place. Another concern pertains to the miner's plans to export the precious minerals in raw form rather than setting up a refinery here as the Balochistan government had planned before a World Bank arbitration forced Pakistan's hands. Barrick should address these concerns as it seems to be in Pakistan for a longer haul.

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No invitation

FOR all of Pakistan's hockey struggles, including their failure to qualify for the Olympics and World Cup as well as their rapidly diminishing status in the sport, there was one event that always had a place for the national team: the annual Sultan Azlan Shah Cup in Malaysia. Not anymore. Pakistan has not received an invitation from the organisers for this year's tournament. Instead, Malaysia will receive top-ranked sides including Belgium, Germany, India and Ireland — all among the world top 10 — during the November tournament. Naturally, the omission has led to an outcry in Pakistan. For the last several years, the Azlan Shah Cup had offered the country a window to the world, an opportunity to gauge where the team stood globally. Last year, when the Olympics were held in Paris — the third straight Games for which Pakistan failed to qualify — the team finished runners-up to Japan at the Azlan Shah Cup. In the tournament's previous edition, in 2022, Pakistan had finished in third place. Alongside Pakistan, defending champions Japan have also not been invited this time.

But while Malaysia has already announced the line-up, Pakistan continues to hope. The Pakistan Hockey Federation has refuted claims that the national team was omitted because there were some outstanding dues it owed to its Malaysian counterpart. With former Olympians adding their voices to the debate, PHF secretary Rana Mujahid has asked the International Hockey Federation president to ensure Pakistan's participation. However, Pakistan must accept the reality. The Azlan Shah Cup is Malaysia's tournament, aimed at the best interests of its own team. Now it has some of the world's top sides coming to play. The sooner Pakistan accepts this, the better. Instead, the PHF should focus on other opportunities to provide competition to the national team, while redirecting its efforts to improving its international standing. While an opportunity for exposure has been lost, the PHF should try and secure matches elsewhere.

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Eid amidst crises

WHILE the more fortunate will be sharing the joys of Eidul Fitr with their families, many in the Muslim world will be observing the festival in the shadow of genocide, starvation and war. Therefore, as we celebrate, let us not forget the people of occupied Palestine and Kashmir, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and other Muslim-majority regions whose lives have been shattered by bloodshed and aggression. The people of Gaza have little to celebrate as Israel shattered the fragile ceasefire on March 18, and resumed its genocidal war against this forsaken territory. Over 900 people have been massacred since the truce fell apart, while overall more than 50,000 Palestinians have been slaughtered by Israel in

Gaza since Oct 7, 2023. People in the occupied West Bank have it only marginally better as Tel Aviv launches blood-soaked forays into the territory at will.

Elsewhere in the Muslim world things are equally grim. For example, while the people of Syria may have ousted long-time strongman Bashar al-Assad last December, stability eludes the country, while militants allied to the government have been accused of carrying out sectarian massacres of the Alawi community. Moreover, Israel has enlarged its occupation of Syrian territory, along with knocking out much of Damascus's defensive capabilities, to ensure the Arab state cannot resist Israeli aggression. Israel — arguably the biggest obstacle to regional peace — has also bombed Beirut after things largely quietened down following last November's truce between the Zionist state and the Hezbollah movement. In Yemen, the US has been conducting air strikes against the Houthis to apparently punish the group for its anti-Israel rhetoric and blockade of the Red Sea. Over 50 people, including civilians, have been killed in the American attacks. Meanwhile, the people of occupied Kashmir continue to be denied their fundamental rights, while Indian Muslims are feeling increasingly marginalised by an Islamophobic government that flaunts its Hindutva credentials. There is also no solution on the horizon for Sudan's bloody civil war, which has dragged on for two years.

Sadly, there has been no unified Muslim response from the 'ummah' — principally in the shape of the OIC — to most of these crises, other than hollow statements, thoughts and prayers. Israel, with the help of the US, has been pulverising the Palestinians of Gaza, while Tel Aviv violates Syrian and Lebanese sovereignty with impunity — but there is no collective pushback from the Muslim world. In fact, Muslim states that have established ties with Israel have not felt it convenient to suspend diplomatic relations until Tel Aviv permanently stops the slaughter. Non-Muslim states such as South Africa, Brazil and Colombia have arguably done much more in solidarity with Palestinians. Until the Muslim world takes practical steps to end these atrocities, these besieged populations will see no joy.

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Women's rights

PAKISTAN'S legal system has issued some important rulings in recent days concerning women, which deserve more discussion and debate on mainstream media. For example, in what can be seen as a strong affirmation of gender equality, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court held last week that a woman's legal rights cannot be tied to her marital status. The court's observations — that a woman's legal rights, personhood and autonomy are neither erased by marriage nor should they depend on it, and to assume

that a married woman is financially dependent on her husband “is legally untenable, religiously unfounded and contrary to the egalitarian spirit of the Islamic law” — may seem like common sense, but they challenge patriarchal attitudes that are not often discussed and which passively undermine women’s autonomy in everyday life. In particular, the court’s observation that excluding married daughters from entitlement to job quotas usually reserved for compassionate causes “reveals a deeper structural flaw grounded in patriarchal assumptions about a woman’s identity and her role within the legal and economic order” cuts right to the heart of this problem.

The ruling has followed on the heels of another verdict issued some days earlier by the Federal Shariat Court, in which the FSC condemned customs that deprive women of their inheritance as ‘unlawful’ and directed provincial authorities to initiate criminal proceedings against those who perpetuate such practices ‘as a moral obligation’. But though both courts have reaffirmed that women’s rights are non-negotiable, has society at large also received this important message? Patriarchal attitudes are often so entrenched that they colour individuals’ judgement about what is right and wrong without them realising it. It would be quite helpful, therefore, if judgements such as these, and others which directly impact women’s rights, were to be given more airtime in the media. Doing so could help empower more women to identify situations in which they are being wronged and encourage them to seek their rights through the law if necessary. The courts alone cannot change society, but if the message they are sending is heard by all, it could trigger positive change.

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Not helping

THE continued detention of Baloch Yakjehti Committee leaders — including Dr Mahrang Baloch in Quetta and Sammi Deen Baloch in Karachi — is yet another misstep by the state in its fraught relationship with the people of Balochistan. Dr Baloch has been booked under terrorism, murder and attempted murder, incitement to violence and rebellion, creating disorder and promoting racial hatred, and property damage, among other clauses. This is a sweeping set of charges against a woman known for her unarmed and democratic campaign against enforced disappearances. Sammi Baloch, who was protesting Dr Baloch’s arrest, was herself detained under the MPO, just hours after a court ordered her release. She was earlier arrested for violating Section 144. The BYC has emerged as a civil society platform that has mobilised Baloch youth, particularly women, around demands for justice, constitutional rights and an end to enforced disappearances. Instead of welcoming this nonviolent civic awakening in a province wracked by insurgency and violence, the state has responded with force and

criminalisation. Protests, court orders and even strikes across the province have not moved the authorities, who seem intent on silencing the BYC through repression.

If the state is truly committed to peace in Balochistan, it must draw a line between militancy and legitimate protest. While terrorists must be pursued with the full might of the state, Mahrang Baloch and Sammi Baloch are not terrorists. They are citizens demanding their constitutional rights: the right to move freely, assemble peacefully, and speak without fear. Their immediate release, along with other detained BYC members, is essential, not only as a matter of justice but as a first step in healing decades of mistrust. Organisations like the BYC and mainstream leadership deserve engagement. The way forward lies not in suppression, but in listening — and ensuring that peaceful, democratic voices are heard, not jailed.

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14. **Obfuscation:** Making something unclear
The obfuscation of facts misled the public.
15. **Subversion:** Undermining the power of a system
He was accused of political subversion.
16. **Emancipation:** The act of freeing someone from control
The emancipation of slaves was a historic moment.
17. **Anachronistic:** Out of place in time
His views are anachronistic in today's society.
18. **Intransigence:** Refusal to change one's views
His intransigence led to the collapse of talks.
19. **Carte Blanche:** Complete freedom to act as one wishes
She was given carte blanche to manage the project.
20. **Belligerent:** Hostile and aggressive
The belligerent nation refused to negotiate.
21. **Espouse:** To support or adopt a cause
He espoused environmental reforms.
22. **Arbitrary:** Based on random choice or personal whim
The decision seemed arbitrary and unfair.
23. **Vociferous:** Loud and forceful
The protestors were vociferous in their demands.
24. **Skewed:** Distorted or biased
The data was skewed by outliers.
25. **Jurisprudence:** The theory or philosophy of law
He studied Islamic jurisprudence.
26. **Conflagration:** A large and destructive fire or conflict
The war turned into a regional conflagration.

