

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of May 2019*

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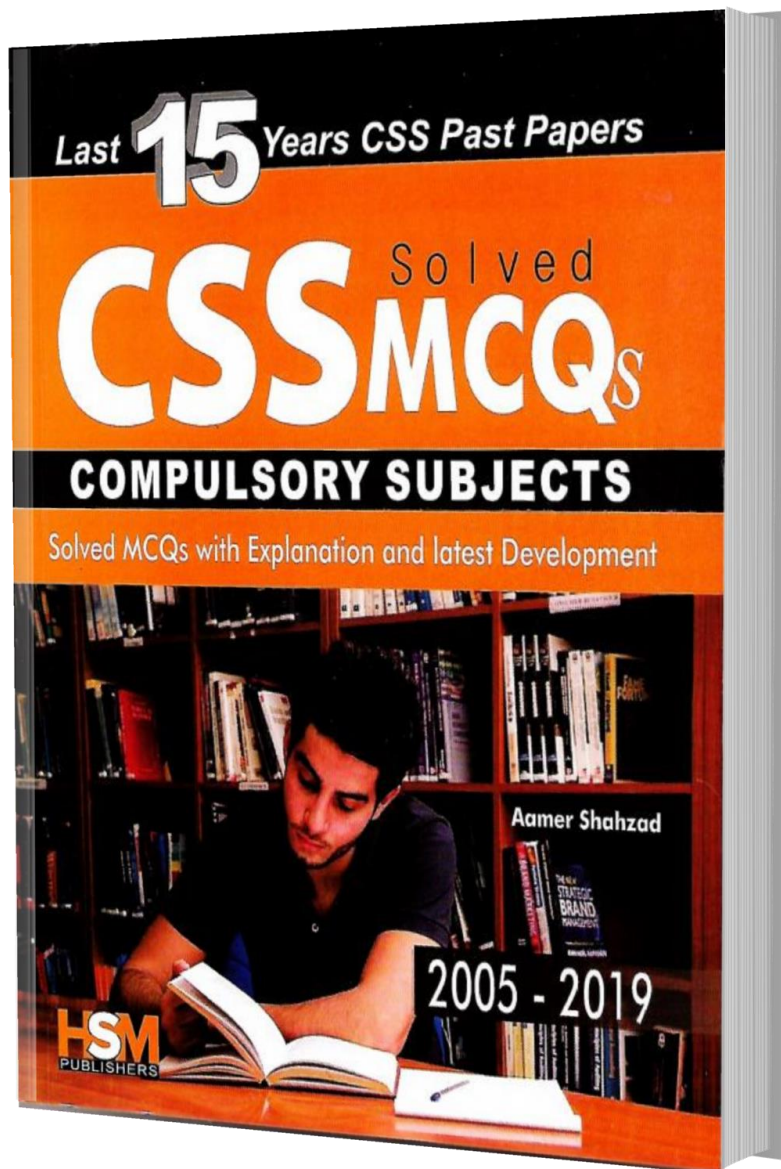


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## An equal justice

JUSTICE underpins fundamental rights; they flow from the idea that each individual is equal to the other and therefore equally deserving of all that citizens can legally expect the state to provide. A global report launched on Monday at the World Justice Forum in The Hague, however, shows that humanity is woefully short of this critical pillar of a civilised society. According to its findings, a whopping 5.1bn people — two-thirds of the world's population — lack meaningful access to justice. That means despite the existence of justice systems in many countries, huge segments of the population are prevented by litigation costs, complicated procedures etc from being able to actually get their problems resolved. These problems span the gamut from the most serious to the comparatively minor. As always, it is the poorest and the most vulnerable who suffer the most.

In Pakistan, recent history is a stark reminder of how the absence of properly functioning justice mechanisms can provide ingress to extremism: one of the major factors that helped the Pakistani Taliban take over Swat was the lack of such a system. In this situation, tribal jirgas, that perpetrate hidebound, patriarchal social attitudes, also acquire 'legitimacy' in the court of popular opinion because they offer cheap, speedy 'justice'. A viable criminal justice system has multiple components, all of which need to, by and large, be working in sync. While the two-year-long movement for the restoration of the judiciary did establish the independence of the institution to some extent, it remained dysfunctional —especially at the lower court level. Pakistan's top judge, Justice Asif Saeed Khosa on Monday approved the release of funds to the Islamabad High Court and judicial academies in capacity building and infrastructural development of the country's lower judiciary. Along with initiatives to dispose of long-pending cases in model courts whose proceedings are monitored by Justice Khosa himself or a member of the National Judicial Policy Making Committee, perhaps there is some light at the end of the tunnel.

## Who is a traitor?

THERE is a long and ignominious history of the state, or powerful elements within it, declaring politically active citizens of Pakistan traitors, foreign agents or externally funded saboteurs of national peace and security.

As Pakistan matures as an independent country and nation, there should have been an expectation that the state would shed some of its worst proclivities, phobias and paranoias.

Instead, powerful elements within the state appear heedless of the past and seem determined to repeat historical mistakes that have driven a wedge between the people and the very state that exists to serve them.

On Monday, an indigenous, organic ethnic rights movement was publicly and quite extraordinarily accused of being on the payroll of hostile foreign intelligence agencies.

In effectively declaring the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement to be an enemy of the state, DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor has perhaps unwittingly cast the PTM in illustrious company.

Preposterous as it may appear today, the sister of this country's founding father was once upon a time declared to be an agent of Kabul in a high-profile newspaper advertisement campaign sponsored by the state, the country's first military dictator, Ayub Khan, fearing Fatima Jinnah's challenge to his rule.

Before Fatima Jinnah, there was the case of Huseyn Suhrawardy, a Bengali politician and briefly prime minister of Pakistan. Suhrawardy, Pakistanis were told by the establishment of the 1950s, was a traitor to Pakistan.

G.M. Syed, a towering politician of Sindh, was imprisoned for decades on accusations of being anti-state and anti-Pakistan. The allegations ought to have been unthinkable — G.M. Syed moved the Pakistan Resolution in the Sindh Assembly, the first colonial legislature to do so — but they were cynically deployed to shut down a political opponent.

Wali Khan, Ataulah Mengal, Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo — each was at some point declared a traitor or foreign agent.

Perhaps most poignantly and tragically, Mujibur Rehman was vilified and declared to be a traitor to Pakistan.

Arguably, had an independent media existed at the time, the reality of events in East Pakistan could have been made known to the public and the catastrophe of secession avoided.

Instead, the military regime imposed a near total media censorship on actual events in East Pakistan.

Today, it is the turn of the PTM to suffer vilification and slander. More ominously, the DG ISPR's press conference on Monday suggests that an attempt to dismantle and shut down the PTM is being contemplated in some quarters.

Some of the PTM's rhetoric is ill advised and inflammatory. But the PTM as a whole is undeniably indigenous and organically founded. It is time for the prime minister to step up and embrace the disaffected and disillusioned youth of the PTM, whose demands are legitimate and constitutional.

Another generation of Pakistanis should not be lost to heedless state policies.

## **Labour Day**

FOR decades, Labour Day has been observed all over the world on May 1 in memory of the Chicago workers who were killed by police while striking for an eight-hour workday in 1886.

But for much of Pakistan, particularly daily-wage workers, today is just any other day.

Whether it is the garment workers bent over machines in factories, the farmers toiling under the harsh glare of the sun in open fields, the construction workers scaling high-rise buildings with minimal safety equipment, or the coal miners scavenging deep inside the depths of mountains, labour and human life come cheap in this country.

Despite the global eight-hour shift, many labourers end up working 12 to 16 hours, some without receiving overtime. With the economy in poor shape and inflation spiking, and as various industries are gripped with layoffs and pay cuts, and unions have lost the power they once held, there seems to be little respite in the near future for those who earn their livelihood through their labour.

As we wait for the federal budget to be announced, the minimum wage is expected to be increased. However, it remains to be seen whether the figure announced will keep the current socioeconomic indicators, such as the family average and consumer price index in mind.

And even when the minimum wage is increased, it takes months for the wage boards to issue the notification. Also, let's not forget poor implementation, as many workers are not even paid the minimum.

There are countless others, too, hired as domestic or unskilled labourers who come under the category of 'informal' work. Pakistan is signatory to a number of international labour laws, but these do not include this large 'invisible' workforce.

Instead, informal economy workers are left at the mercy of their employers' temperaments.

Additionally, there are no labour laws monitoring the agriculture sector, which employs around 65m people and witnesses some of the worst forms of labour exploitation, including modern-day slavery practices in the shape of debt bondage.

According to the Global Slavery Index, there were over 3m people bonded labourers in Pakistan in 2018. Children continue to be employed in these sectors, helping their parents meet ends, instead of attending school.

A state that ignores its workers' rights will be confronted with a labour force that is physically and mentally exhausted. And that will take a toll on productivity.

## Child marriage

JUST a day after the Senate approved a bill by the PPP's Sherry Rehman to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18, a similar bill that was pushed by the PTI's Ramesh Kumar Vankwani was heavily debated in the National Assembly.

Both bills agree on increasing the age of marriage to 18, but they differ on what punishment should be meted out for violations.

Interestingly, while the women parliamentarians of the PTI and PML-N seemed to be in favour of passing the bill, citing the example of other Muslim countries, their male compatriots remained divided on the issue. They could be heard either vocally opposing the bill or seen passively refraining from the vote.

Similarly, loud opposition could also be heard when the bill was passed in the Senate — expectedly from the religious parties, but also from some members of the government.

The reaction from some elected parliamentarians and senators is not surprising as we have witnessed similar responses each time such a move has been included in the national debate before. But it is still disheartening to note how many continue to endorse the marriage of children under the guise of religion.

Although Pakistan is a signatory to international rights treaties that recognise anyone under the age of 18 as a child, deep-rooted cultural beliefs are not easily eroded with a single flick of the pen.

So far, Sindh is the only province to have successfully increased the age of marriage to 18 — and that too after much opposition.

During the recent resistance, Senator Rehman correctly pointed out the inconsistencies in Pakistani laws when it comes to recognising who is a child. For instance, one cannot vote in elections before the age of 18; in fact, one cannot even be issued a CNIC. So how can these youngsters be considered mentally mature to be married off?

Early marriages deprive children of the right to complete their education, and they are forced to take on the burden of adult roles and responsibilities.

Young mothers face health-related complications during pregnancy and childbirth as their bodies are not yet fully developed. Having little to no agency, child brides are especially vulnerable to rape and domestic abuse.

Let it be said in unequivocal terms that child marriage is a harmful cultural practice that deprives the child — and particularly the girl child — of the opportunities that every individual deserves in life.

## **LG change in Punjab**

THE Local Government Bill, 2019, and the Punjab Village Panchayat and Neighbourhood Council Bill, 2019, were rushed through the Punjab Assembly on Monday, signalling an end to the existing LG system and providing for a new one in its place. This latest invention in governance introduces independent local councils for every village of Punjab to be called 'panchayat'. The urban centres will have neighbourhood councils at the mohalla level. The new local bodies are promised direct funds of Rs40bn annually.

Two veterans — Speaker Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi and Law Minister Raja Basharat — showed remarkable manoeuvrability on the day to get the bills past a protesting opposition in a chaotic house. Not only was the opposition thwarted in its efforts to delay the passage, the treasury accused it of lethargy and not reacting to the bill within the 'stipulated' time. But whereas these assertions did appear to leave the opposition, mainly the PML-N, agitated, it is clear that the government was not prepared to tolerate the slightest resistance. This could well have been because the PTI-led Punjab government is on notice from Prime Minister Imran Khan to perform. The local governments are one of the most important items on the agenda, and not just because of the PTI's vow to empower the people at the grass roots. No less significant is the fact that the wrapping up of the local government system installed by the Shahbaz Sharif government would deprive the PML-N of the considerable clout it exercised as it dominated a big majority of the grass-roots bodies.

It is not unusual to see the ruling party in a province attempt to stamp its authority at the LG level. The PML-N rulers in Punjab got passed an LG bill in 2010 with similar ruling-party support, despite opposition protests. The then opposition had suggested more than 20 amendments to the bill, none of which were deemed worthy of incorporation in the 'perfect' bill presented by the Sharif camp. The bill didn't quite entail the immediate establishment of the local governments in Punjab as Mr Sharif went about tightening his grasp on the levers of power. In fact, it was not until many years later that the lower-tier governments were set up. By passing the new bills, the Punjab Assembly on Monday signed the death warrant of the Sharif local governments, paying no attention to the objections of the elected representatives sitting on these councils. There are no guarantees that the PTI will hold LG polls soon. The party is learning from history. The formula is to not go in for an LG election until it is absolutely necessary, ie it is certain that the exercise will empower the party. According to the formula, it is the PML-N's turn to fight the LG idea that seeks to weaken it right at the base.

## Access to tobacco

DESPITE the global campaign against smoking, cigarettes are still making their way into the hands of the most vulnerable. As reported in this paper on Wednesday, at a recent moot in Karachi, activists stated that according to figures compiled by the Pakistan Paediatrics Association, around 1,000 to 1,200 children between the ages of six and 16 are taking up smoking every day in the country. This is a staggering figure by all means. An expert pointed out at the event that nicotine can have damaging effects on the adolescent brain. This means that by allowing children easy access to tobacco, we are adding to all the other impediments we have placed in the way of their healthy growth. Activists also pointed out that the state has been giving tax breaks to big tobacco firms by placing them in lower tax tiers.

Meanwhile, anti-tobacco groups are up in arms — and rightly so — over the fact that the prime minister on Tuesday accepted a donation of Rs5m from a major tobacco firm towards the Diamer-Bhasha and Mohmand dams fund. It was pointed out that under a WHO protocol — the



Framework Convention on Tobacco Control to which Pakistan is a signatory — representatives of the state cannot meet and receive funds from tobacco firms, even under the cover of corporate social responsibility. The prime minister is himself an anti-tobacco activist, while accepting funds from big tobacco would contravene Pakistan's legal commitments. The state should then refrain from taking money from cigarette manufacturers in future. In fact, the government should work to increase taxes on tobacco products. And immediate efforts need to be made to prevent minors from having access to tobacco products. By looking the other way as large numbers of youngsters start lighting up each day, society is allowing a health disaster to unfold. There must be stronger penalties for all those who sell cigarettes to children, while efforts must also be stepped up to make public places free of second-hand smoke.

## **Masood Azhar ban**

AFTER an over two-decade-long career piloting Jaish-e-Mohammad, one of the most lethal jihadi outfits in South Asia, the noose around Masood Azhar appears to be tightening, as the militant mastermind has been designated a global terrorist by the UN Security Council.

Read: JeM chief Masood Azhar added to UN terror list after China removes objections

While some segments may see the move as a 'victory' for India, the fact is that Masood Azhar and his group have caused nothing but trouble for this country. The JeM may have made India-held Kashmir its focus, but its cadres have caused plenty of havoc in Pakistan as well. For example, its militants form the nucleus of what is known as the Punjabi Taliban, a loose confederation of jihadists, also consisting of sectarian elements. Though the JeM was banned in 2002 by Pakistan, its activities continued and Masood Azhar was largely a free man. Now, with the UN proscription, it is hoped that the group is permanently shut down and its head not allowed to continue his activities.

India had been trying for over a decade to get Masood Azhar blacklisted. Each time its efforts would be blocked by China on 'technical' grounds. What this translates to is that India was using the JeM and its head to

project the Kashmiri freedom struggle as a ‘terrorist’ insurgency, hence the Chinese and Pakistani resistance to the move.

Now that the “political references” have been removed, as the Foreign Office has put it, China has lifted its technical hold, paving the way for the JeM chief’s blacklisting.

Two lessons emerge; first, that India has been trying to conflate the legitimate — and largely indigenous — Kashmiri freedom struggle with terrorism. This false binary must be exposed; India cannot be allowed to link the Kashmiri struggle for justice and rights with terrorism. Secondly, the state must realise that tolerating such groups is a liability for Pakistan. Far from serving any ‘strategic depth’, these outfits end up isolating the country internationally.

Perhaps if we had put our own house in order, India would not have been able to exploit the situation and associate jihadist groups with Pakistan. It is also hoped that the blacklisting of Masood Azhar will help strengthen the country’s case with FATF, to prove that Pakistan is working hard to eliminate all militant outfits.

Ultimately, all militant groups and non-state actors that promote hateful, divisive and sectarian narratives must be shut down. Their funds must be choked and their organisational capabilities neutralised. All of this — and more — has been highlighted in the National Action Plan; it is just a question of summoning the will to implement it.

## **Diminishing freedom**

TODAY is World Press Freedom Day, and in a global environment where authoritarian regimes are in the ascendant, even in ostensibly democratic countries, it is all the more important to celebrate the role of the journalist in holding power to account.

Fittingly enough, this year's theme is 'Media for democracy: journalism and elections in times of disinformation'.

When journalists are painted as enemies of the people, it should be cause for alarm. A free and independent media is the cornerstone of democracy, and plays a critical role in ensuring the fairness and transparency of the electoral exercise. When governments legislate to muzzle the media, when they discredit journalists and sow confusion in the public by promoting false narratives, often through third parties on social media, it signals their intention to prevent scrutiny of their policies and actions. Journalists who threaten this impunity do so at the cost of their lives.

According to IPI, an association of media professionals in nearly 100 countries, 55 journalists across the world were killed last year. Several of them were working on exposing corruption in the corridors of power.

Read: Press freedom under serious threat from govts worldwide: IPI

However, the situation in Pakistan illustrates that press freedom cannot be gauged by the number of body bags alone.

Granted, compared with 15 media persons who were killed in this country during 2010 and 2011 for reasons confirmed as being related to their work, 'only' four since 2015 are believed to have lost their lives in the line of duty. However, more telling is that only three murders of journalists in Pakistan have been successfully prosecuted.

At the same time, there is unprecedented pressure on editors — sometimes cloaked as 'advice'— to drop certain stories, even specific quotes publicly uttered by elected officials; give a particular spin to news reports; and avoid some topics entirely.

The modus operandi employed to force compliance would make a despot smile: vicious smear campaigns, physical violence, abductions and legal harassment on spurious charges, including treason.

Resistance by media outlets is countered by strong-arm methods to disrupt their circulation and limit their viewership.

International election observers in their report on last year's polls noted that the media's critical role as a platform for political debate was severely

eroded by intimidatory tactics, and that the consequent self-censorship rendered election-related coverage “devoid of journalistic, non-partisan scrutiny”. The PTI government should consider the possibility that one day it too may want an independent media to tell the story like it is.

## **Closure to Sahiwal**

THE brother of a man who was among the four victims of a shootout in Sahiwal in January has gone to the Supreme Court asking for a judicial commission to probe the incident. The four people, three of them of the same family, were killed allegedly by the officials of the Counter Terrorism Department which was established when the conventional law-enforcement machinery failed to meet the challenge posed by terrorist groups in the country. Not only has the probe, which involves a joint investigation team, been termed faulty, the investigators too have been accused of tampering with evidence in order to protect certain CTD officials. The complainant has shown exceptional commitment to persevere in the face of discouragement. Earlier, the Lahore High Court had dismissed a similar petition by the same man, while his pleas to Prime Minister Imran Khan for constituting a judicial commission did not yield any results either. The application insists that the formation of an independent judicial commission is his only hope to get to the facts.

A police encounter is always difficult, if not impossible, to prove. An aggrieved party has to begin the trek towards justice by registering a complaint against the police with — who else but the police. That is a daunting task which can make the complainant exhausted and bring the pursuit of justice to an early end, leaving the case unresolved forever. In instances where this initial hurdle is overcome, the complainants are later heard speaking of being obstructed by officers who want to save their colleagues at any cost, even if it means violating the law. Forces especially created to meet extraordinary situations are even more difficult to rein in and hold accountable since they are always empowered with special authority and freedoms to pursue their assignment. Ultimately, a fair probe is dependent on the direction given by the judges of the higher courts, just as the Supreme Court now holds the key to bringing some closure to the Sahiwal shootout.

## Sharifs on the move

SOMETHING is afoot. The signs are that the PML-N is preparing for an existence, at least temporarily, without the Sharifs. The PML-N denials have not been powerful enough to dispel the impression. PML-N politics has taken a crucial turn. Shahbaz Sharif has stepped down as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly, a position his camp had fought hard to secure. Fuelling further rumours about a long absence, Mr Sharif has also quit as PML-N parliamentary leader in the Assembly. This 'sudden' change of heart has left people astounded, not least PML-N supporters. As tradition goes, the N-League cadres cannot be faulted for being unable to tell the party from the family. The Sharifs are the party for them, notwithstanding the good reputation of anyone else being tipped to take over. That the Sharifs will be thrown out of the contest is a fear the PML-N has had for a while. There has been much strain on the party with its two flanks initially following two distinct survival courses. But that was some time ago. The Nawaz Sharif-Maryam Nawaz route was all but abandoned when slogans of resistance from their platform died down and the former prime minister and his 'promising' daughter took refuge in silence. Next, the party as whole seemed to place its faith in the manoeuvrability of Shahbaz Sharif to rescue the faltering dynasty. The latest statement of disinterest is a deadly blow to such hopes.

If it is time for a new generation of Sharifs to take over, it would be a tough choice between Hamza Shahbaz — an extension of the Shahbaz Sharif flank — and Maryam Nawaz, who would make old-timers uncomfortable by building up an anti-establishment image. The PML-N without the Sharifs visibly in command would be ripe for a split. Many factors could encourage the PTI to wrest territory away from the PML-N. A major indication of this is the new local government system being set up in Punjab. The exercise is going to provide the PTI with an opportunity to choke PML-N support at the grass roots. The task will be easier without the Sharifs.

Would they go forever, or for a certain period as happened after the 1999 coup? Who has sanctioned the exit? Who are PTI politicians hinting at when they say the Sharifs are asking someone for amnesty? This amounts to admitting that the power to give the Sharifs — and others — relief does not lie with the PTI government. The truth may be that when Prime Minister

Imran Khan angrily says there will be no amnesty for the Sharifs and others he actually means there should be no amnesty. He may be addressing not those asking for it but the powers who can grant it. We must keep a tab on Mr Khan's tone for grand disclosures about any game-changing departures.

## **HIV in Larkana**

LARKANA has great significance in the country's political imagination. As the birthplace of the founder of Pakistan's (now) third-most powerful political party, it has remained its stronghold for decades. But despite its political and historical significance, it seems to have been accorded low priority, with consistently poor socioeconomic indicators. The recent HIV/AIDS crisis in Larkana should be seen as a wakeup call for the government of Sindh. Out of the 93 patients who were screened, 67 are children. There are several reasons responsible for the spread of the virus, including faulty blood transfusions, medical malpractice and unsafe sexual practices — and yet it continues to be a highly taboo subject. Sufferers are ashamed to talk about their ailment or seek help, and they may find themselves ostracised at a time they need the most attention. As new cases keep being reported and the number of HIV sufferers rises following blood screenings by the recently implemented Sindh AIDS Control Programme, there is a need for an urgent inquiry into the matter. An FIR has been registered against one 'doctor' by the Ratodero police. Some have called him a 'quack', but his credentials are yet to be ascertained. At this point, he has been suspected of using a single syringe and cannula on multiple patients, causing the spread of the disease in the village. Shockingly, the 'doctor' himself is said to be suffering from the deadly virus and has denied any deliberate involvement in the spread of the disease. It is important to remember that the investigation is still in its preliminary stages. Similarly, 73 cases of HIV have been reported from Hyderabad between January and March this year following blood screenings by the Peoples Primary Healthcare Initiative. These figures are alarming, and the importance of large-scale province-wide blood screenings cannot be understated.

One cannot help but wonder where the provincial government has been all this time. The PPP needs to divert its attention away from Islamabad and back to its constituents. The party has always presented itself as the voice of the poor, the weak, the marginalised and downtrodden, but the reality on the ground says otherwise. Until the PPP focuses on the health, education and development of Sindh, it will be pushed into oblivion and irrelevance — regardless of how powerful its politicians' speeches are, or how eloquent their rhetoric.

## **Loya Jirga's demand**

A LOYA JIRGA — a grand assembly of Afghanistan's tribal, political and religious leaders — has just concluded in Kabul with the demand by the delegates for a ceasefire in the country. The jirga was convened for a discussion on how to forge a peace deal with the Afghan Taliban. While the Afghan elites were putting their heads together in Kabul, the Taliban are continuing a parallel process with the Americans in Doha. The jirga's demand that the Taliban put down their guns is indeed justified. But the fact of the matter is that the insurgents are unlikely to do so, especially when they consider themselves to be negotiating with the Americans from a position of strength. Moreover, the Afghan government needs to offer clear terms to persuade the militants to become part of the political process; at the moment, the Taliban are dismissive of the set-up in Kabul, terming it as America's 'puppet'. It is also unfortunate that some major opposition figures and opponents of President Ashraf Ghani were absent from the Loya Jirga, including Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. This sends the message that the Kabul elite is divided and unable to present a united front. Before the Afghan government can attempt to engage with the Taliban, it would need to set its own house in order and bring together all political forces in order to exert the pressure needed to negotiate with the group.

At their end, the Taliban would do well to show flexibility and open channels with Kabul, while negotiations between the Americans and the Afghan militia should not be allowed to stall. If the current negotiations turn out to be talks for the sake of talks, an early end to the bloodshed in Afghanistan is unlikely. There has been some progress, and a pessimistic

view may not be necessary. However, all sides in the conflict — the Afghan government, the Taliban and the Americans — must be willing to give, take and compromise for the peaceful and prosperous future of Afghanistan.

## **Changes at the top**

THE weekend began with a surprise series of announcements that the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan and the chairman of the Federal Board of Revenue had been removed from their respective positions by the government.

The former was asked to resign while the latter learned that his transfer orders were being prepared. Coming in the middle of the negotiations with the IMF, that are at a critical juncture as they approach closure, and as the budget deadline looms, both announcements shook the country.

These are not unimportant posts; the State Bank governor is a co-signatory to the IMF agreement and the FBR chairman has to deal with the revenue target that forms a critical plank of any such programme.

So the timing was bound to raise questions, though the simple answer could be that stronger alternatives were needed in both these posts before any programme could be finalised.

Apart from the timing, the larger question now is the nature of the replacements and what shape future economic policy is likely to take after these changes.

What is clear is that the new adviser on finance, Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, is now putting together his own team.

Considering that Reza Baqir is being appointed as the next State Bank governor, it appears that Mr Shaikh wants to surround himself with people who are technically sound and command credibility in international financial markets and multilateral bodies.

In short, he wants to prioritise rebuilding the state's credibility with its international lenders.



That credibility had taken a hit over the past three years as external-sector deficits grew and nothing beyond ad hoc and piecemeal policy steps were taken in acknowledgement of the problem.

It seems that now, after a hiatus of almost a decade, the State Bank is set to have a strong, technically sound and independent governor who will value excellence in the conduct and discharge of the central bank's responsibilities — or one hopes anyway.

That may be a positive aspect but there is another dimension that needs to be kept in mind.

The country's economy is driven by forces that go beyond its international creditors and financial markets. In fact, large-scale rackets play an important role in the foreign exchange, debt and equity markets.

The same is true of the revenue system and its myriad holes and pockmarked exemptions.

The new team, once in place, would be well advised to strike a balance between the technical and institutional knowledge that will be required to ensure that its policies don't veer too strongly in one direction, or unwittingly become subject to elite capture through ways and means that the textbook does not warn us about.

An important step has just been taken, and the path ahead will test the government's resolve. Strong people in key posts will be helpful for the government.

## **Afridi hits out**

CRICKETER Shahid Afridi's book has stirred controversy involving past heroes and has brought into question the response of those in authority at crucial moments of our cricketing history.

This is all Pakistan needed as it heads into a series against England followed by a tough World Cup in that country.

Game Changer relives some glorious moments and pays tribute to Karachi cricket. But it also lays bare the internal battles plaguing national cricket; it

is quite remarkable how the team, with all the intrigues and disputes, still retains its presence among the top sides of the world.

The account, a partnership between the fearless Shahid Afridi and the book's author Wajahat Saeed Khan, confirms some old assertions as well as gives new information on the subject.

The most significant episode thrown up by their joint expedition coincidentally relates to an England tour: the infamous Mazhar Majeed affair of 2010. The sportsman emphasises how his tip-off about Majeed's approach to Pakistani players had failed to move the team's management.

The aggressive all-rounder's narrative of the ugly happening paints the Pakistani cricket administration in passive colours, offering an explanation for why the country has been so vulnerable to invasions by match-fixers.

From that painful chapter, Salman Butt emerges as worthy of condemnation, while the harshest judgement is reserved for Narendra Modi and Darrel Hair.

Shahid Afridi, who concedes that the authorities had understated his age when he first started off, is least convincing when he tries to clarify why he couldn't play to his full potential. He blames it on those who tried to coach him.

He is very clear about his friends and those whom he does not like, with very few anonymous exceptions.

Wasim Akram leads the bunch of friends but another great, Waqar Younis, is placed in the company of those he discards: Shoaib Malik, Aamer Sohail, and indeed, Javed Miandad, who greatly disappointed our protagonist in person after first inspiring his India dream with his famous Sharjah sixer.

Imran Khan is a childhood favourite in an account that doesn't mind typecasting — frequently referring to DNA and Pathan origins. But then, he is bold enough to say that, while the jury was still out on how fair the 2018 polls were, he thought it was a case of 50-50.

That is perhaps an indication of the independent mind that sets Shahid Afridi apart from the others and makes his call deserving of attention.

## UN environment report

THE UN has compiled an expansive draft report on the state of the world's environment, and as the document's key findings indicate, there is reason for grave concern. What the report sums up is the fact that due to decades of overconsumption and unsustainable lifestyles, humans have had a devastating impact on the planet. In particular, a growing population requires tens of billions of tonnes of resources; this is having a debilitating impact on the land, the rivers and seas, and the air. The figures are indeed alarming. According to the estimates, 75pc of land, 40pc of oceans and 50pc of rivers "manifest severe impacts of degradation". One does not have to be an environmental scientist to realise that plastic refuse is choking our drains and floating in our seas, untreated sewage is flowing into our waters and destroying marine life, and toxic air is making it hard for us to breathe.

But although the prognosis is grim, a poisoned dystopian future can be avoided if the international community — especially the industrialised states who tend to be the biggest polluters — come up with a workable plan of action to combat the effects of environmental degradation and climate change. While population control should be a central plank in the strategy, increasing the use of renewables in the energy mix can also go a long way in reducing our carbon footprint. Moreover, there must be a rationalisation of the use and manufacture of plastic. For example, in Pakistan, the ubiquitous plastic 'shopper' has wrought considerable damage. The move should be towards more environment-friendly materials, eventually phasing out single-use plastics. While some critics have said this country has no proper climate change policy, the fact is that the whole global community must work on a common plan, as environmental degradation does not confine itself to borders. And in this regard, those who have withdrawn from major climate accords — such as the US — and other developed states must play a bigger role in reducing their carbon footprint

## Climate of impunity

SEVENTY-TWO dead, including 48 deliberately singled out and murdered and 24 killed in the line of duty — these are the journalists who have lost their lives in Pakistan since 2002. They were among the bravest of the community: many of them took on some of the most powerful in the land, exposing corruption in high places and its tentacles in officialdom and the criminal underworld. Some refused to allow militants to terrorise them into silence. Then there were others who, despite the risk to their physical safety, were on the front lines of violent clashes. Sometimes, after having rushed to the scene of a bomb blast, they were caught up in a secondary explosion. And yet, only in three instances have convictions been obtained. These include the cases of Daniel Pearl (murdered in 2002), Wali Babar (murdered in 2011), and Ayub Khattak (murdered in 2013). A report in this paper on World Press Freedom Day, May 3, captured the climate of impunity that allows the death of almost every journalist to go unpunished.

There is another category of violence — one that may not result in death, but nevertheless also serves to instil fear in journalists, so they do not raise their voices against injustice and criminality. According to the Pakistan Press Foundation, during 2018 alone, there were at least 22 cases of physical assault on journalists to prevent them from performing their professional duties. Then there are indirect methods of coercion such as legal harassment, including detention and arrests on blatantly spurious charges. The law against cybercrime, problematic to begin with, has been weaponised to target those who articulate opinions on the media that offend a state increasingly intolerant of independent thought or reasoned debate. In such a climate, it is all the more important for media outlets where such journalists are employed to unequivocally stand by them, vouch for their integrity, and ensure they are provided the best legal defence possible. To disown them in such a situation is a disservice to the profession. Moreover, editors should remember that capitulation is a slippery slope; there is no telling what will next be asked of one.

Certainly, the criminal justice system in Pakistan leaves much to be desired. Many families have no closure and must live with the knowledge that the killers of their loved ones roam free. However, the impunity with

which journalists have been cut down in the line of duty — or silenced through intimidation — has implications for society as a whole. When the conduits of information are choked off, the system of checks and balances is hobbled. Keeping the people ignorant facilitates the abuse of power. It is also worth asking why, even in the most open-and-shut cases, have the killers of journalists not been brought to book. Whose interests are threatened by the valiant work they do?

## Transgender rights

THE front page of Saturday's edition of this paper carried a photograph of members of Peshawar's transgender community smiling as they held out their Sehat Insaf cards for the camera. Just the day before, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government distributed cards to address health grievances faced by the community, and to ensure free medical treatment for HIV/AIDS and cancer, or financial help for a range of other illnesses. The gesture is a significant one, and it highlights sincerity on part of the state towards ending discrimination faced by the community. The health concerns of the transgender community have long been a tale of neglect in a country that struggles to understand the needs of non-binary people. Health practitioners often refuse to get involved in their issues, or they lack the required sensitivity. In the worst instances, they outright discriminate against or harass members of the transgender community and refuse to even address their most basic health concerns; with societal prejudice and ignorance trumping their professional obligations. For instance, when a critically injured victim of a gunshot wound was rushed to Peshawar's Lady Reading Hospital in 2016, the doctors and nursing staff left her unattended for hours, resulting in the victim dying from neglect. One must ask: where is the transgender community supposed to go to have their health concerns addressed under such circumstances? They are usually disowned by their family members and looked down upon by the rest of society, making them a very vulnerable and isolated group. They are seen as an object of scorn or ridicule — human lives reduced to a cruel punch line. And they continue to face some of the most depraved acts of violence. Last year, another transgendered person in Peshawar was killed and then her body was mutilated, hacked to pieces.

When Pakistan passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in May, it was rightfully hailed as a landmark progressive law. Not only does it guarantee the right to self-identify, it also outlaws discrimination by employers and private business owners. It is reassuring to know the state is aware of the issues that exist and is taking the right steps. However, until the message is absorbed by society, equality and respect for the transgender community will remain a dream. It is unfortunate that changing mindsets takes a lot longer than passing legislation.

## **NAB chief's tirade**

NAB CHAIRMAN retired Justice Javed Iqbal recently launched into a long-winded defence of his institution after asking participants at a ceremony in Multan a rhetorical question: why had the corruption watchdog not been struck down by the judiciary if its performance was so poor? Justice Iqbal remarked, “A few days back, a gentleman said that NAB is the largest institute of money laundering. Even if we buy his claim, believe me, this money laundering is for the sake of the public and not for the sake of making properties in Paris, making agriculture farms in Australia and building towers in Dubai and Muscat.” It appears that the growing criticism against the anti-graft body had hit a nerve, especially considering that Justice Iqbal’s response included oblique references to politicians who are being investigated for allegedly transferring wealth abroad.

While NAB officials have every right to defend themselves against what they are saying is “malicious propaganda”, lashing out at critics — largely opposition politicians — who are levelling criticism is detrimental to the bureau’s image. First, it will further escalate the blame game between those under investigation and NAB — something that is already playing out daily on prime time news shows. Second, and perhaps more importantly, is that such attacks from the chairman against opposition members will only confirm misgivings that NAB is biased against certain politicians. By saying that Pakistan’s financial crisis is the fault of those who have “towers in Dubai, properties abroad and Panama-like matters”, Justice Iqbal is betraying that he is operating on the presumption of guilt and not innocence, even as investigations proceed against several politicians. Much like former chief justice Saqib Nisar, who would lash out at

undertrials in court, he is misusing his position to target those who he believes have illegally amassed wealth. The NAB chairman would do well to remember that justice must be seen to be done, and that accountability officers who do not exhibit impartiality only weaken the people's trust in the system.

## **Serious about taxes**

THE government's appointment of Shabbar Zaidi as the new chairman of the Federal Board of Revenue shows that the new finance team taking shape around finance adviser Abdul Hafeez Shaikh is taking its revenue-generation responsibilities with utmost seriousness.

Mr Zaidi is no stranger to the world of taxes and the FBR bureaucracy.

As a chartered accountant he has been an adviser to many governments in the past on matters ranging from drawing up the budget, new tax measures and amnesty schemes.

But now comes a major challenge, where he has to actually deliver the results himself, and to chase what is likely to be one of the most difficult revenue targets in recent years.

How he does so without increasing the tax burden on those who are already compliant payers will be his biggest test, but only after he has successfully tackled the conflict of interest concerns that are cropping up around his appointment.

The appointment comes days after the World Bank released a report saying that Pakistan is meeting less than half of its tax potential.

The surprising and counterintuitive conclusion of the report — called the Pakistan Revenue Mobilisation Project — is that there is “substantial potential to increase tax receipts without imposing new taxes or raising tax rates”, according to the authors.

Improvement in tax compliance alone could virtually double the revenue potential of the country, from 13pc of GDP to 26pc.

It further highlights that the services sector has the largest tax gap compared to manufacturing, and the sales tax has a higher gap than income taxes. It points to low tax morale and legal loopholes as key factors contributing to poor tax compliance.

The loopholes the report points towards include benami transactions, prize bonds and the no-questions-asked culture surrounding them, foreign remittances that are beyond the reach of tax authorities, and very low taxes on immovable property that encourage the flow of black money into the real-estate sector.

Mr Zaidi has intimate familiarity with each of these areas. He has written about some of them himself, and has long been a champion of amending Section 111(4) of the Income Tax Ordinance that grants impunity from tax to all foreign remittances.

He has the deep local knowledge of how rackets operate in our economy to deprive the state of its rightful share of revenue, and his writings show that he is sensitive to the revenue interest of the state, having once called taxes “the price of civilisation” on the pages of this newspaper.

So now comes his moment of truth, the moment when he has to demonstrate clearly that these were not mere words. He must show that revenues can be raised without burdening the existing taxpayers and the poor, and without sparking messy confrontational battles.

## Spiritual’ university

SPEAKING in Gujjar Khan on Sunday after laying the foundation stone for a new university, the prime minister hinted at government efforts to fuse science and spirituality. “Promotion of leadership qualities and spiritualism” would be the main focus of the new varsity, named after celebrated 12th-century saint Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani. The prime minister added that Islam and science were interlinked, recalling the contributions Muslim scientists made to learning during the classical period. While Mr Khan’s intent may be noble, some clarity is needed. Sufism and spirituality are esoteric sciences, which have been passed down through the centuries by



learned teachers and masters in khanqahs and dargahs across the Muslim world. On the other hand, the material sciences are very different from the concepts espoused by metaphysics. Therefore, mixing the two would be a questionable proposition. There is indeed space for more study of the history of Sufi thought, the lessons derived from the works of spiritual masters etc, because at present, our academic institutions have not done — with a few exceptions — any major research work of high scholarly quality on the spiritual heritage of the Muslim world. In fact, especially over the last century or so, it is Western universities that have produced acclaimed work on Muslim history and spirituality. Even many modern Muslim scholars — Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr etc — have thrived in the milieu provided by Western universities, after soaking up the knowledge of the East and the West. So while it may be a good idea to encourage quality research of Islam's heritage and history in Pakistan, mixing this stream of academic inquiry with efforts to improve scientific learning should be reconsidered.

Where mainstream science is concerned, the fact is that we fare very poorly. Figures compiled by Alif Ailaan show that the national mean score for science results in Pakistan is 433 out of 1,000. Unfortunately, pseudo-science is rife here while many students, especially in the public school system, have a very poor grasp of even elementary scientific principles. Therefore, perhaps the focus of the state, especially the provinces which oversee education, should be to improve the teaching of science and maths so that youngsters are able to absorb the basics of these subjects. While institutes need to be developed to extract moral and ethical lessons from Sufism, let us not mix apples and oranges by conflating spirituality and scientific education.

## **Gaza attacks**

THE New York Times the other day apologised to its readers for publishing a cartoon that showed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, portrayed as a canine, leading a visually challenged President Donald Trump wearing a rabbi's skull cap. While it is not surprising that sensibilities were offended by this graphic portrayal, the sentiment behind the cartoon was an apt comment on the Trump administration's

aggressively pro-Israel policies. The sketch was published a few days before the flare-up in Gaza that resulted in the death of several Palestinians and the destruction of apartment blocks. Israel claimed the buildings housed militants. Then in a vulgar display of military muscle, the Likud government rushed tanks, artillery and infantry units to Gaza's border to terrorise the defenceless population of a strip that Edward Said appropriately called "an open-air prison". Even if we accept Israel's claim that its action constituted retaliation, the use of the air force resulting in civilian casualties was out of proportion to the rocket attacks by Hamas and its ally, the Islamic Jihad. America, of course, defended Israel's right "to self-defence against these abhorrent acts".

On Sunday, a State Department official, in his own words, "broke new ground" when he said Washington would from now on equate "anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism". While his focus was on foreign policy rather than on America's political scene, observers say such a move would have domestic consequences, for it could encourage right-wing hate groups. The policy shift is not surprising when seen against the background of a series of actions the Trump administration has taken — like moving the embassy to Jerusalem, shuttering the Palestinian Authority's offices in Washington, D.C. and cutting off aid to UN relief agencies in Palestine. With an eye on a second term for President Trump, these vote-influencing moves are part of the Republican Party's abject surrender to America's strong Israel lobby, especially the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. That this "new ground" torpedoes all values enshrined in the American constitution is another matter.

## **Price hike in Ramazan**

NO sooner had the fasting season begun, accompanied by a heatwave in many parts of the country, than the markets saw a price hike in the most essential items almost across the board.

From meat and pulses to vegetables and flour, nothing has been spared from this price hike, bringing hardship and grinding suffering to the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society.

And to top it off, the market players are saying that the impact of the recent fuel price hike has yet to be factored in, which means further increases should be expected in food prices.

The consumer price index for the month of April may have shown a slight dip from the preceding month, but the outlook on inflation remains on the upside to use the sanitised language of economists — and nothing burns the heart of the poor like inflation does, especially when it comes to food prices.

At the same time, one sees disarray in the economic team of the government, adding urgency to the task ahead.

The budget is now weeks away and a new chairman of the FBR is yet to be formally installed, while a new finance adviser is still busy finding his feet and coming to terms with the IMF's demands.

The onset of Ramazan and the approach of the budget now compete for the attention of a lonely and hapless individual at the top, while the poor suffer in the fires of inflation, at least in part due to the negligence and distractedness of the rulers.

No word has come of a package of support for the utility stores, for example, where at least the most desperate and vulnerable can find a little refuge from the price hikes that threaten to engulf them.

The provincial governments have their role to play here as well, since the federal government has only limited powers to intervene in developments on the ground.

Part of the price hike may well be due to macroeconomic trends such as a large increase in fuel prices only days before Ramazan, but what may be equally to blame is the hoarding and profiteering on the part of unscrupulous traders as they see the onset of a demand spiral coming their way.

Keeping the markets steady during Ramazan has always been a challenge for governments, both federal and provincial, and usually this has been magnified by the imbalances plaguing the economy.

This time round a new element must be included: a government distracted and at war with itself and its peers in the house.

The new economic team has no time to waste, nor should it concern itself with the political fires that will be burning around them with more ferocity in the coming days. Its thoughts should be anchored in the welfare of the poor.

## **The disappeared**

AGAINST the backdrop of the days-long sit-in outside President Arif Alvi's Karachi residence by many relatives of allegedly missing young Shia men, the Sindh police on Monday finally threw some light on the matter. However, aside from perhaps affording the families some relief that their loved ones are still alive, the law-enforcement agency's words were cold comfort. A senior police official at a press conference in the city claimed that the force had arrested five people, including a reporter from an Urdu-language newspaper, for their alleged involvement in sectarian killings and "anti-state activities". Among the more startling claims was that some of the individuals had received several days' training in various aspects of militancy in a "neighbouring country". The spokesman for the Shia Missing Persons Relatives Committee however, rejected the assertions outright, saying that the men were among 41 belonging to the community — out of a total of 80 across Pakistan — who had been abducted from various parts of Karachi a couple of months ago. He alleged that some had been missing for years.

Whether there is any substance to the police's claims is yet to be determined, but that is not the point at issue. What can be stated with some certainty is that this bears all the hallmarks of the shameful phenomenon of enforced disappearances from which it seems no corner of the country is safe. The right to due process has clearly been violated here: given that the families have been protesting for several days, it seems rather convenient that the police have suddenly produced such serious allegations against some of the individuals. Nor were the detainees produced in court within 24 hours of their arrest as required by law. To add insult to injury, the senior police official also suggested that some people listed as "missing" may have gone underground to evade capture. It is a

story familiar to many a family that knows unequivocally that their loved one was abducted, not arrested; that he or she may be undergoing torture; that they may never see them alive again. Enforced disappearances are universally considered among the most heinous crimes committed by a state against its people. Yet, despite all the condemnation of the execrable practice by the families of the missing and by right-thinking members of society, those guilty of it have never been called to account. The government's silence on this gross human rights violation is deafening.

## **It needn't be moonshine**

THERE is nothing surprising about a government minister for science and technology proposing a scientific solution to the old issue of how to determine the lunar calendar. There are many in the country who would believe that the clergy could have summoned science to their side over the matter a long time ago. In this respect, Minister Fawad Chaudhry's step to end decades of lunar uncertainty is to be commended and would have earned him greater praise, had it not been overshadowed by an unfortunate slip of the tongue when he recently credited Suparco with sending the Hubble telescope into space. In the making for decades and launched into orbit in 1990, this solar-powered telescope has brought the universe to our doorstep through its spectacular images of distant galaxies, collapsing suns, and stars leaping into life. It has both captured the timelessness of space and contributed to scientists' understanding of its origins. Tragically, the credit for this explorer of the skies must go to Nasa, as Suparco is still some light years away from unlocking the secrets of the universe.

But, there is always a silver lining — just as there are genuine mistakes. Clearly, all the energy that Mr Chaudhry devoted to the ministry of information before being shown the door by an unappreciative government can now be concentrated — sensibly — on his new responsibilities. His task is a difficult one: not only has he to improve the state of science and technology in the country, he must also lead the way in promoting respect for the subject and building an environment where it can thrive in educational institutes. He has already tried to assert his ideas undaunted by a powerful clergy that has been irked by his practical suggestion about

moon-sighting. However, there is a need to consult senior experts and collaborate closely with the education authorities to encourage scientific knowledge in general. After all, the PTI's promise to this country was rooted in the idea of change.

## **Data Darbar blast**

IN a disturbing reminder of the mayhem that has plagued Pakistan for the past many years, Lahore's iconic Data Darbar dargah was struck by a suicide bomber on Wednesday morning.

The apparent target of the atrocity was a contingent of the Elite Force stationed outside the shrine for its security; at least five policemen were martyred in the attack.

According to media reports, Hizbul Ahrar, said to be a splinter faction of the local Taliban, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Of course, this is not the first time that a Sufi shrine has been attacked in Pakistan.

Data Darbar was previously targeted in 2010 while the shrines of Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, Rehman Baba in Peshawar, and Baba Farid in Pakpattan, have all witnessed deadly violence perpetrated by militants.

Extremists bear a grudge towards Sufi dargahs and practices, and law enforcers and security personnel, regarded as symbols of the state, are 'easy' targets.

The Data Darbar bombing, as well as a number of other recent attacks, such as the one on the Hazara community in Quetta, indicates that militant groups are communicating to the state that they are far from vanquished.

Hizbul Ahrar has been involved in acts of terrorism elsewhere in the country, including Karachi, and at one point the security apparatus had claimed the militant outfit had been 'broken'.

If it is indeed confirmed that Wednesday's attack was carried out by the same group, then the law enforcers spoke too soon.

Moreover, with security already high in the country due to religious activities associated with Ramazan, it must be asked how the suicide bomber managed to slip through.

Better intelligence coordination is needed between the civilian and military security agencies, as well as between the provinces and the centre, to keep an eye on the resurgence of militant groups.

Security personnel — whether the police, paramilitaries or the armed forces — are on the front lines guarding sensitive installations and places of worship.

The families of the martyred personnel must be looked after by the state.

While there is no replacement for their loved ones, the least the state can do is to care for the families of those who fall in the line of duty.

As for the security of dargahs and shrines, it is a pity that such places of worship have become so heavily securitised, as opposed to the open, welcoming nature they have exhibited for centuries.

However, these are difficult times and they call for strict security measures to protect the lives and property of the people.

Increased intelligence sharing and vigilance are essential as large crowds of people will gather throughout Ramazan — for taraviah prayers, for Yaum-i-Ali, for Eid shopping etc — which is why all precautions must be taken to minimise the danger to ‘soft’ targets.

## **Trafficked ‘brides’**

THE FIA’S crackdown this week on a sex trafficking ring has exposed a sinister modus operandi that feeds off the dark underbelly of society in both Pakistan and China.

The latter’s decades-long one-child policy as well as cultural preference for male offspring has resulted in its ‘missing women’ phenomenon, forcing many Chinese men to look for spouses abroad.

This has had the unintended consequence of creating a fertile hunting ground for human and sex traffickers.

The arrest of several Chinese and Pakistani suspects in Lahore come days after Human Rights Watch raised the alarm on reports of a “disturbingly similar” pattern documented in some other Asian countries: human smugglers posing as ‘matchmaking’ services to source their hapless victims, luring women from marginalised backgrounds with claims of a better future for them.

Indeed, in recent weeks, Pakistani media reports have shed light on how many women (reportedly even minor girls) — mostly from poor, Christian families — were conned into ‘marrying’ Chinese men and migrating to China, only to be trapped in a vicious cycle of isolation, abuse and exploitation.

In a country where poor minority women face triple-fold discrimination — and whose disappearances would presumably raise scarcely an eyebrow — it is hardly surprising that con artists would specifically target them.

Given the Punjab FIA director’s statement to the media that this ring of foreign smugglers and local facilitators had been active for at least a year — as well as the likely presence of similar networks — it is pertinent to ask whether the authorities had any awareness of or interest in this criminal activity before it was publicly exposed by the press and HRW.

Though both are often vilified, it is precisely when the media and human rights groups are free to perform their duties unobstructed that abuses are uncovered — paving the way for the state to deliver justice.

They serve complementary, not antagonistic, functions.

As investigations continue, Pakistani officials must not succumb to a xenophobic temptation to target law-abiding foreigners and their legitimate business dealings in this country.

Across the border in China, our foreign mission must actively coordinate with local authorities to trace and verify the status of women who may be there against their will, and provide all necessary consular support.

At home, awareness-raising campaigns among at-risk communities are essential to help prevent them from becoming victims of such predatory schemes.



## Living with thalassaemia

MAY 8 was marked as World Thalassaemia Day around the world, with this year's theme being universal access to quality thalassaemia healthcare services. Despite suffering from relatively higher rates of the genetic blood disorder, with approximately 6pc of Pakistanis having thalassaemia minor, there is little awareness of the condition among the general population. Thalassaemia is a DNA mutation inherited from at least one parent/ carrier which causes imbalance in haemoglobin levels, with some children developing symptoms at birth and others during the first two years of life. Some of the symptoms include fatigue, weakness, pale or yellowish skin colour, facial bone deformities, slow growth and development, and abdominal swelling. According to reports, approximately 5,000 to 7,000 babies are born with thalassaemia each year in Pakistan. Patients require regular monthly blood transfusions and chelation therapy to remove excess iron from their bodies. This is not only a painful procedure for a child to endure, with its share of side effects, it is also extremely expensive for the parents. The average Pakistani citizen simply cannot afford such costly healthcare.

One way to counter high rates of thalassaemia is to make premarital blood screening compulsory. While often a thalassaemia minor carrier leads a normal life and is oblivious to his or her condition, if one gets married to another, there is a higher likelihood of their child being born with thalassaemia major. The risk is even greater in cultures where marriages within the family are common, such as cousin marriages in Pakistan. Countries such as Iran which sit on the 'thalassaemia belt' have been able to curb the disorder successfully through extensive thalassaemia prevention programmes since the 1990s. As part of these programmes, all couples wishing to marry are required to undergo blood screenings before being given their marriage certificate. Pakistan should look to the example of its western neighbour and start a similar programme so that men and women can make an informed choice. Prevention is always better than cure.

## Opposition in hibernation?

WHEN Prime Minister Imran Khan graced the National Assembly with his presence on Wednesday, it was expected that the opposition — which has been robustly protesting the petroleum price hike and rising expenses — would pose tough questions before the Assembly. But alas, despite the rare opportunity to criticise government policies in front of Mr Khan, and in sharp contrast to earlier sessions, the opposition remained subdued. In fact, if it were not for the passing reference made to the prime minister by Raja Pervaiz Ashraf of the PPP, the session would have concluded without any lawmaker acknowledging that Mr Khan was even there. Noticeably, Mr Khan, who was in parliament after a gap of more than two months to preside over a PTI parliamentary party meeting, did not utter a single word during the session.

The behaviour of the opposition comes as a surprise for several reasons. First, the PPP and PML-N lawmakers have routinely criticised the prime minister for not living up to his promise of attending Assembly sessions. On a day when Mr Khan did appear, MNAs who otherwise have no qualms about hitting out at government policies appeared to have taken a vow of silence, as though there was no economic crisis in the country. Even with the usual noisemakers, such as Marriyum Aurangzeb, Rana Sanaullah, Khawaja Asif and Syed Khursheed Shah present, there was a palpable and jarring tranquillity in the session after a flurry of criticism online and in press conferences. Second, just a few nights earlier, the PML-N had pulled out all the stops in Lahore to demonstrate its street power when Nawaz Sharif was being taken back to Kot Lakhpat jail upon the expiry of his bail. The PML-N stalwarts who prominently participated in what was billed as a ‘solidarity march’, and who have repeatedly criticised the government’s policies in recent weeks, were silent on the petrol price hike. Astonishingly, no mention was made of the controversy surrounding the appointments of the State Bank governor and FBR chairman that have implications for the upcoming budget.

Not only was Wednesday’s session a missed opportunity for opposition lawmakers to put critical questions to the prime minister, it was also an indication of a strategy in disarray. This has been more than evident on TV talk shows, with some PML-N legislators warning of street protests and

others calling for mid-term elections. Clearly, with Shahbaz Sharif in London and Nawaz Sharif back in jail, the PML-N ranks are betraying a lack of direction. The opposition's role is to ask questions of the government and hold the latter accountable to the public — a key component of a democratic system. It must fulfil this function responsibly and with dedication if it wants to challenge policies which it deems are not in the best interest of the people.

## Aasia's departure

FINALLY, a shameful chapter in this country's history has drawn to a close.

It emerged on Wednesday that Aasia Bibi — in protective custody at an unknown location since being acquitted of blasphemy by the Supreme Court last year — has left Pakistan for Canada, which has offered her asylum along with her family.

She had spent eight years in prison for a crime she did not commit.

The case, which burst into public view in 2009, catapulted one among millions of anonymous farmhands toiling on fields across the country into an enduring object of hate for the ultra right.

The ripples extended well beyond the immediate circumstances: the assassination in January 2011 of then Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer at the hands of his own police guard was a direct consequence.

Six months later, minister for minorities Shahbaz Bhatti who, like Taseer, had expressed support for Aasia Bibi and demanded changes to the blasphemy law to prevent its abuse, was also gunned down.

Mercifully though, unlike the acquittal that sparked rioting in various parts of the country, her departure for foreign shores played out quietly.

Aasia Bibi's ordeal took on a heightened significance from the outset.

This was perhaps because there was a woman at the centre of it, that too a Christian woman — in a patriarchal society where the minorities are already vulnerable to discrimination, even persecution.

Pressure from around the world also meant that the Pakistani government had a stake in at least ensuring Aasia Bibi's physical safety during her years of incarceration, even as the trial process dragged on.

However, there are many forgotten blasphemy accused whose cases have faded from public memory; the demand for their fair treatment comes only from their hapless families.

Take Junaid Hafeez, for example.

Mr Hafeez was a visiting faculty member at a leading Multan university when he was accused of committing blasphemy by some students and arrested in March 2013.

His case illustrates the extent to which the cancer of extremism has spread in this society.

Rashid Rehman, the lawyer defending Mr Hafeez, was threatened by no less than some of his fellow advocates who evidently believed there are exceptions to the fundamental right of due process.

On May 7, 2014, Mr Rehman was shot dead in his office; his murder remains unsolved.

The Pakistani state must not continue to abjure its duty to those victimised by the blasphemy law.

## **Education crisis**

CHIEF JUSTICE Asif Khosa seems to have taken a special interest in the state of the country's education sector, castigating governments for their failure to fulfil their constitutional duty of providing an education to all children between the ages of five and 16. On Wednesday, he warned of an impending national crisis with millions of children out of school, and unable to access quality education. There are several reasons why so many Pakistani children are out of school; nearly all stem from poverty and issues of access. First, there are simply not enough government schools in the country to accommodate everyone. Many children have to travel long distances to get to school, particularly in the rural parts. If transport is not provided by the school and parents do not have the time to accompany

them or the means to arrange for the commute, families see no other choice but to pull the child out of school. Most government schools that exist are at the primary level. Secondary and tertiary schools are even fewer, and the distance to reach them greater. In contrast, there are private madressahs in practically every street.

Second, while public education may be free of cost, there are added expenses that are not covered, such as uniforms, bags, stationery, etc. Even if these costs are not high, it adds up in large families with many children. Children also drop out of school if the quality of teaching is poor, or if they feel discriminated against by authority figures, or if corporal punishment persists. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah recently pointed to mediocre teaching, and recommended compulsory workshop training sessions. The rise of private schools has exacerbated societal inequalities and resentments, and allowed the state to abdicate its responsibility of providing quality education. With the budget to be announced soon, it remains to be seen whether or not the PTI government, which has always propagated a strong social agenda, will live up to its promise.

## **Rolling back the gains?**

AS budget time draws near, and the country gears up to enter yet another IMF programme, the fiscal framework will once again come under scrutiny. It is therefore useful to recall that not long ago, the prime minister, during a rally in Ghotki, claimed that the 18th Amendment had “bankrupted the federation”. If the federation is starved of resources because of the provincial transfers, the clearest path forward is tax reform to increase the size of the resource envelope available to the centre, rather than casting about for ways to roll back the scale of the transfers. After all, the PTI has included this in its manifesto.

The concerns of the government are understandable, since the devolution scheme under the 18th Amendment and the NFC award have significantly shifted resources and responsibilities to the provinces. But the government needs to also advance more credible ideas and a vision for mobilising its own resources rather than searching for ways to roll back the gains made by the provinces. Netting more tax filers is a good way to encourage a culture of compliance, but it cannot be said to be a vision for

documentation of the economy and broadening of the tax base. Unless it puts in its own share of effort to raise revenues, the government risks sounding unfair when it decries the provincial transfers under the devolution scheme.

Why are provincial transfers, particularly under the 18th Amendment, a source of such deep irritation to the PTI government that controls two provinces directly? One would think such an arrangement, where the same party controls the centre and two provinces, would provide the ideal opportunity to take advantage of the constitutional amendment and the attendant NFC award that transfers more than half of the resources collected in the federal divisible pool to the provincial governments. This is the time to accelerate devolution, for the federation to rid itself of those responsibilities that it does not need to be holding on to — such as the Higher Education Commission which should also be devolved. And most importantly, for a party involved in ushering in a progressive and deep-rooted reform of local governments in Punjab, along with an accompanying fiscal model for local governments, the idea of devolution of power itself should be appealing. If the centre is starved of resources, the clear path forward is tax reform coupled with further devolution of responsibilities to the provinces, not rolling back the gains of the past decade simply to help foot the bill for the federation's current expenditures. Words should be chosen carefully — in this case, the 18th Amendment has given the prime minister and his party the opportunity to improve governance and service delivery at the provincial and local government levels where the people can directly access the centres of powers.

## **Madressah registration**

IN the aftermath of the explosive growth of madressahs during the Zia era, the state has been grappling with ways to regulate seminaries. This need became all the more acute following the events of Sept 11, 2001, especially when militancy started to rear its ugly head in Pakistan in a big way in the late 2000s. Indeed, while not all madressahs are involved in extremist acts, the sheer number of unregistered seminaries in the country means that unless the state has an accurate database of such institutions, monitoring and regulating them will be very difficult, allowing radical

elements to misuse unregulated madressahs. In this regard, Federal Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood has said that his ministry and religious scholars have agreed to register all madressahs, and prevent these institutions from being misused, spreading hatred and encouraging sectarianism. While several governments have struggled with this tricky subject, it is hoped that the PTI-led federal administration is successful in coming up with a mechanism that can regulate seminaries, and help fuse their religious curriculum with modern and vocational subjects. Mr Mahmood said that 30,000 seminaries would be registered, adding that seminarians would be given vocational and technical training. The government at a cabinet meeting held later resolved to put in place a uniform syllabus for schools and madressahs in the country. While the move itself may prove challenging to implement, and will not be without provincial misgivings, insofar as it means bringing the madressahs into the fold of mainstream education, it is a wise decision.

Indeed, Pakistan has paid dearly for letting madressahs function without any oversight. Militant and sectarian groups have misused seminaries while hard-line clerics have raised small armies through networks of madressahs and their associated fundraising arms. While seminaries that restrict themselves to academic learning are acceptable, the state should clamp down on those that are used as fronts for militant outfits, which is why it is essential for the rulers to know how many madressahs are functioning in the country, what and who they are teaching, etc. Additionally, it is the need of the hour to equip seminarians with technical and real-world skills to ensure that once they graduate from their institutions, they have the qualifications to apply for decent jobs and make a positive contribution to society. Otherwise, with no opportunities for career advancement, dejected madressah graduates can become an easy prey for extremist outfits.

## **Heatstroke centre attack**

IT is unfortunate that the ugly face of extremism and intolerance manifests itself in so many different ways in this country. News emerging from Sukkur shows that extremist vigilantes are more than willing to resort to violence to enforce their myopic code on others. On Thursday, armed men,

believed to be associated with a religious outfit, stormed a heatstroke camp set up in Sukkur and started firing into the air. The camp had been set up by the local municipal corporation as temperatures have been scorching in upper Sindh over the last several days, regularly crossing 40°C. The extremists had apparently warned the organisers to refrain from operating the camp during fasting hours, arguing that it was a violation of the Ehteram-i-Ramazan Ordinance. When the organisers resisted their diktat, the extremists attacked a camp in the Ayub Goth centre. The local authorities have shut down the heatstroke camps and say they will be reopened after “necessary consultations”.

No one has the right to take the law into their own hands. Besides, in their extreme religiosity and enthusiasm to ‘punish’ others, the attackers blindly ignored the fact that Islamic injunctions allow the sick, the infirm and travellers to not fast. Considering the high temperatures in the region, the city administration did the right thing by setting up camps to ensure that those suffering from heatstroke could easily get access to medical help and water. Moreover, even the Zia-era Ehteram-i-Ramazan Ordinance allows exemptions for eateries in hospitals, railway stations, airports etc. The bottom line is that fanatics cannot be allowed to impose their narrow views on others, that too at gunpoint. The administration must trace out those involved in the attack and bring them to justice, so that others are deterred from indulging in such violence and moral policing. In the longer run, it is the collective responsibility of the state, society and the clergy to actively resist intolerance and extremism, and to promote a more inclusive worldview.

## **Documenting the economy**

THE new chairman of the FBR has laid down his priorities immediately upon arrival and put special emphasis on the documentation of the economy and broadening of the tax base. This is the right place to begin, though he will require a great deal of policy backing from the finance ministry as well as the office of the prime minister in order to make progress on this important objective.



The fact that there is an FBR chairman properly sensitised to the need for broadening the tax base is a step forward since it is the tax bureaucracy that has traditionally been a major obstacle in this area.

If Shabbar Zaidi can manage his end of the proposition, and is suitably supported at the policy level by the government, there could be renewed hope.

What is critical is to ensure that existing taxpayers are not made to bear the brunt of the enhanced revenue target that the government will have to pursue under an IMF programme.

It seems Mr Zaidi is aware of this since his first directive upon taking up his assignment was to prohibit the attachment of the bank accounts of businesses without prior approval from the office of the chairman. This practice had become too rampant of late, and FBR officers were undoubtedly getting overzealous in shaking down those in their clutches as pressure to bridge the revenue shortfalls mounted.

But beyond this, pursuing the undocumented transactions is going to be far more complicated than simply bridging the trust deficit between taxpayer and tax authority. There is no doubt that the new chairman knows this since there are ample public utterances of his own that testify to this. The leakages from the Afghan transit trade, to take one example, are commingled with the supply chain of consumer durables across Pakistan's wholesale and retail sector. Even if the retailers wanted to declare the true value of their merchandise to the tax authorities, the fact that much of it has been purchased from smugglers would prevent them from doing so. There are other complications too, and at some point a stick will doubtless be required to urge people into compliance.

Automation of filing processes and minimising contact between taxpayer and tax collector are necessary steps, and will pave the way for more robust documentation efforts. But alongside these steps, policy support will be required.

In time, Mr Zaidi will need to speak more frankly with the government that appointed him, and explain to them the importance of acting independently of vested interests when crafting policy. He might also face political headwinds, especially if he begins to make genuine headway towards his

goal. These could come from any direction because the rackets that will be impacted are agnostic to political affiliations. Let's hope he is prepared and serious.

## **Another land scam**

AN old land scam in Karachi has been revived and is once again being perpetrated on hapless citizens looking for affordable options in a housing market increasingly beyond their means, where demand far outstrips supply. A recent investigative report in this paper about Malir Development Authority's Taiser Town Scheme 45 laid bare the project's dubious history which inspires little confidence in its ability, or even its intention, of fulfilling the stated objective of providing affordable housing for low- and lower-middle income families. In the 23 years since the scheme was first launched, even basic infrastructure remains missing; there is no provision for electricity, gas or water supply to the area. What there is in plenty, however, is people's yearning to have a house of their own, and their expectation that a government project would be a safer bet than a private, profit-driven scheme. This has enabled unscrupulous land authorities to entice many into parting with their hard-earned money. After all, empty promises are more difficult to resist when one is living hand to mouth in a one-room rented abode. Given it can take decades before a final verdict in civil cases is obtained, those affected — especially when they belong to the lower socioeconomic strata — are left with little recourse.

Questionable housing projects such as Taiser Town are intrinsically linked with the dire housing shortage in the country. The urban housing demand in Pakistan is at least 350,000 units per year. At present, the backlog is 11.5m units, a figure that increases by 200,000 annually. The most affected by far are the lower- and lower-middle income segments of the population; one obvious outcome is the densification of the localities in which they are already living and the consequent decline in the quality of life. Yet it is two decades since any major government housing scheme has been announced in any urban centre. Karachi, with its high levels of rural-urban migration, is particularly affected. Shelter is a fundamental human need. However, instead of the government disposing of land keeping social and developmental factors in mind, the land bureaucracy

has become partners in crime with shady real estate developers and builders backed by sections of the power elite. Profit is the bottom line. Consider that the thousands of acres occupied by the colossal Bahria Town Karachi had been reserved for MDA to develop a low-cost housing scheme, and the scale of corruption becomes clear.

## **The invisible ones**

WHENEVER sanitary workers go on strike, cities bustling with commercial and cultural activity grind to a standstill. That their work is noble and necessary is recognised in every (civilised) part of the world — even if it is undervalued and taken for granted to the point of being ‘invisible’. In fact, as has been said before, civilisation itself depends on these workers showing up to their jobs. And yet, there are few occupations in the subcontinent that continue to be filled with as much tragedy, suffering and exploitation. This week, workers in Taxila went on strike against the non-and-delayed payment of their salaries by the Rawalpindi Waste Management Company’s Taxila chapter. Under the harsh glare of the sun, they protested against the company’s unethical practices and aired their grievances to the media. Many sanitation workers continue to suffer from job insecurity and low salaries. It is unfortunate that one of the most dangerous jobs is simply keeping the country’s various cities and districts clean. Day in and day out, sanitary workers have no choice but to immerse their bare bodies in untreated sewage water and fecal sludge, with no protective gear or equipment, inhaling toxic fumes and risking death each time. Many die in the line of duty, and their deaths barely cause a whimper in the collective consciousness.

Most sanitary workers belong to minority communities, and a history of caste-based discrimination and marginalisation haunts them through the generations. In 2017, a string of cold-blooded murders took place in which sanitary workers were targeted across the country. While the killings were blamed on militant extremist groups, bigotry towards sanitary workers is very much ingrained in our society. It was not too long ago that young Irfan Masih died after being refused treatment by doctors at the Umerkot Civil Hospital. Had we as a society acknowledged there is dignity in labour and there are no ‘pure’ or ‘impure’ human beings, perhaps he would have lived.

## US sabre-rattling

IT seems like déjà-vu. Once again the US is preparing a casus belli for war with a Middle Eastern country based on flimsy grounds. We have seen the same rhetoric in the run-up to the wars in Iraq, Syria and Libya (with all three countries shattered). Now it seems that the powers that be in Washington want a head-on collision with Iran. Over the past few days, disturbing reports have been emerging of a US military build-up in the Gulf. The Americans have sent two warships, including a strike group, to the Gulf, along with a missile defence system. Moreover, American bombers have reportedly been stationed at a US base in Qatar. The Americans say the mobilisation is in response to an unidentified Iranian “threat”; Tehran has said the moves are merely “psychological warfare”. The spark, it seems, for the latest confrontation between Iran and the US is the nuclear deal. However, a deeply held desire amongst hawks within the Trump administration for regime change in Iran is perhaps the real driver of hostility. The US has found ways to criticise Iran on other fronts, even though the IAEA and the European co-signatories of the nuclear deal all confirmed that Tehran was abiding by it. This indicates that the deal is not the problem; the warmongers in Washington want to depose the ayatollahs.

While saner elements in Washington, as well as the Iranian establishment, may want to avoid war, any miscalculation in the current charged atmosphere can result in hostilities. The US may be a superior military power, but if war does break out, the theatre will stretch from the Gulf to the Levant, with Iran deploying its allied militias against the Americans. Moreover, those American allies keenly gunning for war — eg Israel, the Gulf Arabs — could find themselves in the direct range of the Iranians. Therefore, to prevent a conflagration of regional proportions, the Americans need to pull back from the brink.

## Attack in Gwadar

FOR the second time in a month, Balochistan is the scene of a terrorist attack. Even more disturbing, the incident took place in Gwadar city, whose port is the gateway to CPEC and the veritable jewel in the crown of

the multibillion dollar project — which makes the area one of the most heavily secured in the restive province. Nevertheless, on Saturday three armed assailants, disguised as security forces personnel, managed to make their way up the promontory overlooking the port and storm the PC hotel located at the top. According to official sources, five individuals — four of them hotel employees, including three security guards who tried to fight off the attackers, and a navy official — lost their lives. At least six people were injured, and the militants themselves were killed. The banned Balochistan Liberation Army has reportedly claimed responsibility, as well as a far higher death toll.

The ferocity of the attack can be gauged by the fact that it took the security forces all night to clear the hotel and declare the premises safe. While it is commendable that law enforcement acted as quickly as it did, which may have helped in keeping the number of casualties comparatively low, a couple of questions instantly present themselves. One, how did the militants access the luxury hotel, situated at a vantage point, with such apparent ease — that too in broad daylight? Two, how was it possible for them to conduct an operation in such a sensitive area without intelligence agencies getting wind of it? These security lapses must be investigated thoroughly in the coming days so that any loopholes can be plugged and further violence averted.

The motive is of course patently clear. Baloch separatist groups have made no secret of their hostility towards CPEC, which they perceive as yet another manifestation of state plunder of Balochistan's resources. They seem to have stepped up their campaign in recent months with a number of high-profile attacks. On April 18, around a dozen gunmen singled out and killed 14 bus passengers, including 11 personnel of the navy, air force and Coast Guards, travelling on the coastal highway near the town of Ormara, also in Gwadar district. Last November, BLA launched an armed assault on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, killing two policemen and two civilians. These are but two among several such recent attacks, and they illustrate the Baloch separatist groups' tenacity in their war against the Pakistani state. Containing them by force is necessary, but it is not a durable solution. The only long-term resolution to this extended, if low-key, conflict is a political one. The state must reach out to disaffected nationalists and individuals who have some currency with the more

obdurate Baloch. Moreover, it must do all it can to eliminate extremist groups of all stripe — ethnic, sectarian and ultra nationalist.

## **Healthcare nightmare**

CONSIDERING the growing healthcare crisis in the country, it is necessary to frequently raise the alarm. The horrifying tally of HIV-positive cases in Sindh, and now in Balochistan, and the increasing number of polio victims, just when there was some hope that the poliovirus was close to being eliminated, reflect the health authorities' inability to take charge of the situation. Dengue is a real danger, and while the public-sector doctors (when they are not fighting the government for an increase in perks) are capable of an improved response to this mosquito-borne affliction, the threat is present for a good part of the year. To exacerbate matters, Pakistanis appear to be developing resistance to conventional treatment for a number of illnesses. Typhoid is one such illness; first reported in Hyderabad, extensively drug-resistant typhoid has affected thousands of people. The prevailing gloom in the health sector is all the more difficult to lift when the overall picture in the country is dismal. There is huge pressure on resources that keeps budget allocations low, and prices of medication high, leading to demands for greater action and efficiency by the health authorities at the centre and in the provinces.

The government understands the importance of doing — and being perceived as doing — something worthwhile in the healthcare sector, such as launching health cards to alleviate the suffering of those who would otherwise not have been able to afford treatment. Unfortunately, the intended and actual benefits of the ambitious scheme have been overtaken by stories of gross inefficiencies and medical malpractice at many public and private healthcare concerns. The gap between service and need is far too big. The government has reacted by showing the federal health minister the door in last month's cabinet reshuffle — apparently for his failure to bring down the price of medicine, and to reassure the people that it is fully in command. But if the move created hope, it hasn't helped that the minister's replacement from the NGO sector, drafted in as an adviser to the prime minister, has been unable to project himself as someone who recognises the need to act immediately.

Meanwhile, there is much noise and confusion in the healthcare sector with new systems being proposed and new rules being formed for medical practitioners. Given our tendency to be hit by all kinds of illnesses, a national health plan, devised with the input of all provinces, must be quickly put in place.

## **IMF deal at last**

ALMOST nine months into its term, the PTI government looks like it is starting afresh after the agreement reached with the IMF staff.

The details of the deal are awaited, but based on what we have thus far it is hard to see where exactly the gap between the deal signed on Sunday and what was proposed back in October has been narrowed.

What can be gauged from the reporting thus far is that the size of the fiscal adjustment that has been agreed on with the staff (board level approval is still awaited though it is expected to be a formality) is more or less the same as what was being demanded during the February meetings, perhaps even the earlier ones in October.

On top of that, the Fund statement released on Sunday mentions a “market-determined exchange rate” which was widely considered to be one of the important sticking points.

Privatisation has not been included in the programme, going by the language of the Fund’s statement, but ensuring that the state-owned enterprises do not bleed public finances is an important priority.

Crucially, this means higher power tariffs since that is one area where the state-owned entities have been the biggest burden on government finances.

Overall, it is easy to see that the deal is going to be a significant challenge for the government.

Reaching the target of 0.6pc of GDP as the primary deficit means an adjustment of more than 1.5pc of GDP just on the fiscal side.

This is not exactly unprecedented, as the government is claiming, but it is challenging nonetheless, and the rulers will undoubtedly meet plenty of resistance from the business community, while raising taxes on items like power and fuel will engender a popular backlash.

Cutting development expenditure to meet the fiscal deficit target will not be an option to any significant degree. Nothing is known yet of what the targets are in the other critical area, ie the building up of foreign exchange reserves, but it looks like that too will be a serious challenge.

Now comes the moment of truth, when a government that has come to power on the back of populist promises and quick fixes has to tell its voters that inflation and unemployment will have to be their lot for at least a few years before growth and prosperity can return.

The government would be well advised to ensure as much transparency as it can when advancing down the road of adjustment that lies before it.

Political support and ownership will be critical to successful implementation, and a strong bargaining position at the table when the reviews take place will only come if ownership is broad based.

The politics of adjustment will now define the government's course going forward, and transparency will be the critical ingredient for success here.

## **Missing women**

LAST week, the ECP revealed that a regrettably wide gap exists between registered female and male voters in the merged tribal districts, where elections have been scheduled for erstwhile Fata for seats in the KP Assembly. In a survey of 16 constituencies — which is set to increase with the passage of the Fata bill in the National Assembly yesterday — overall female voter registration had been documented at 20pc less than male voters. In some seats, the gap was as large as 37pc. Recent awareness campaigns spearheaded by the ECP in tribal districts motivated women to apply for CNICs; in the past, too, the commission's efforts in improving female turnout by establishing mandatory benchmarks yielded better results. Alas, even after these endeavours, the gender gap in electoral lists has remained high. Evidently, a lot more needs to be done to bolster



female voter registration and the ensuing turnout — but the mantle must be taken up by stakeholders beyond the ECP.

In the past, some chauvinistic politicians and tribal elders have jointly prevented women from participating in elections as they abhor the notion that women can be empowered to make a choice. Politicians, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the voting process, must engage with women in the tribal districts instead of discounting them. They would do well not to hide behind the pretext of tradition, but, instead, attempt to close the large and persistent gender gap by launching campaigns to understand why women are reluctant to be counted in elections. Between educating these missing women about their voting rights, facilitating them to get CNICs, and launching door-to-door campaigns, there is plenty of work to be done by candidates. If campaigns remain male-focused, not only are politicians allowing the disenfranchisement of females in their constituencies, they are also hurting their own chances of success in the polls. After all, in a population of about 5m people in these areas, almost half are women. Technical solutions — such as the clause in the Election Act 2017, which allows the ECP to nullify results in constituencies where female turnout is less than 10pc — are important but not enough. The onus to bring about a change in the patriarchal mindset which keeps women out is on the candidates who wish to represent the people of the merged tribal districts. They must actively identify the hindrances faced by women in these areas and collectively strive to close the gender gap.

## **Sana Mir's feat**

THE country's most celebrated women cricketer Sana Mir has added yet another feather to her cap by becoming the most successful ODI spinner in the annals of women's cricket.

A brilliant all-rounder, Sana reached the coveted milestone of 146 wickets in only her 118th ODI while playing against South Africa at Benoni on Sunday.

The 33-year-old overtook Anisa Mohammed of the West Indies and Lisa Sthalekar of Australia to clinch the honour. Since her ODI debut back in 2005, Sana has made great strides in the game.

In October 2018, she became the first Pakistani women cricketer to take the number one position in the ICC ODI bowler rankings; she has led Pakistan to two gold medals at the Asian Games in 2010 and 2014; and was announced Player of the Tournament at the 2008 Women's World Cup Qualifiers.

Needless to say, her performances have been the cornerstone of the women's team's success in international cricket that has included a series win over the West Indies and a drawn series against the formidable South Africa this month.

More importantly, Sana has been an inspirational figure for her colleagues and a role model for young players including current captain Bismah Maroof, Aliya Riaz, Javeria Wadood, Kainat Imtiaz, Nahida Khan, Nida Dar, Sidra Nawaz, Diana Baig and many others who form a competitive unit today.

She has also led Pakistan confidently in the past and inculcated a culture of teamwork and discipline reflective in her own performances.

Having said that, life has not been a bed of roses for Sana who started playing cricket in the streets. She has had to tackle many challenges on her way to glory.

She is part of a culture where neglectful officials, lack of training venues, scant facilities, poor media coverage and snubs from sponsors have dogged women's cricket.

That she has taken it all on the chin to emerge taller each time makes Sana Mir really special and a living legend of Pakistan women's cricket.

## **NA unites for Fata**

IT has been a long time coming, but the National Assembly finally put pen to paper on Monday and unanimously passed the 26th Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2019, that would allow the people of erstwhile Fata the representation they deserve in the assemblies. Passed by all members present in the house, the bill has increased tribal districts seats in the KP

Assembly to 24 from the recommended 16, in addition to 12 National Assembly seats.

The development is a step in the right direction, and a continuation of the move towards a unified system of governance and justice as well as the allocation of equitable resources to a part of the country which has been 'otherised' and treated unfairly for decades.

With likely approval from the Senate and with an election on the cards, prospective voters in the tribal districts would, for the first time, elect a number of representatives to the provincial assembly proportionate to the region's population grouping.

That lawmakers on both sides of the aisle set aside their differences and voted in the affirmative to pass the bill was a rare feat — given the rambunctious nature of regular Assembly proceedings and the bitter rivalry between the government and the opposition. In fact, it was a truly welcome show of solidarity on an occasion which demanded that grudges be set aside in order to reflect on the right of the people of the tribal districts to have a louder voice in parliament.

The bill was the first-ever private member's amendment bill passed by the lower house, as previous amendments had been made through the treasury benches' bills. It is also the first constitutional amendment passed since the PTI came into power nine months ago. Moved by independent lawmaker Mohsin Dawar, supported by the opposition, and approved by the treasury benches without criticism, the bill and its passage prove that if the government and opposition benches want, they can work together. Without a single vote cast against the amendment, its passage is an outstanding victory for the National Assembly.

In this spirit, the Assembly can turn its focus to other issues which have been pending due to political differences — such as the creation of the South Punjab province. Currently, three bills on the subject are lying before committees to be debated and concluded. The arguments for the need for a new province are numerous, and include the point that it would allow for the independent and equitable distribution of funds from the centre. Reservations between the government and opposition on this issue must be resolved with the same pragmatism that lawmakers have displayed this

week. Surely, it is possible for better sense to prevail especially when this demand, too, is based on the right of the people — in this case the people of south Punjab — to have fair political representation.

## **Another execution**

IN 2013, Sialkot-native Imran Haider was arrested in Jeddah for carrying 500g of heroin. For the next six years, he languished in a Saudi prison without a trial. He met his tragic end this week in the latest instance of an execution of a Pakistani citizen in Saudi Arabia. That his story, and its outcome, is not uncommon does not make it any less shocking. Just last month, two other Pakistanis, a married couple, were put to death for allegedly attempting to smuggle narcotics into the kingdom. Their only child returned home an orphan. It was the first instance of a Pakistani woman being executed in Saudi Arabia in five years. Within that five-year period, over 100 Pakistani nationals were executed. This year alone, some 15 Pakistanis have been put to death, while last year, the number of executions stood at 30. Out of the approximately 3,300 Pakistanis trapped in Saudi prisons, most belong to poor labour backgrounds and were simply in search of employment and opportunities in the kingdom, or trying to fulfil their lifelong dream of performing religious rites. Many were entrapped by criminal elements who deceived or coerced them into the drug-trafficking trade. Once in prison, they have no contact with the outside world, while their families suffer great distress and uncertainty.

When Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman came to Pakistan in February, he made a promise to Prime Minister Imran Khan. When the premier brought up the case of millions of Pakistani labourers working in Saudi Arabia, the poor who form the bulk of the Pakistanis languishing in Saudi prisons (“these are people very close to my heart, they are very special people,” he emphatically stated), he requested the Saudi prince to see them as his own. In response, the Saudi prince told the prime minister to consider him “an ambassador of Pakistan in Saudi Arabia”. The next day, an announcement was made that around 2,000 Pakistani prisoners would be released. It sounded too good to be true, while some believed that perhaps this was the diplomacy of naya Pakistan in effect. But three months later, no such thing has materialised, and only a handful of

prisoners have been released. In waiting for the promise to be fulfilled, there is no saying how many more vulnerable Pakistanis will be executed. More efforts on Pakistan's part to bring back those incarcerated in the kingdom are sorely needed.

## **Mind your language**

ACERBIC verbal sparring among rivals is considered par for the course in politics, but when flippant remarks run the risk of trivialising serious issues in the process, it is perhaps time to pause and reflect on whether there are less socially damaging ways to engage in political point-scoring. Now that the PTI government's long-expected deal with the IMF has been inked, several opposition leaders — including PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who has often been praised for seeking the moral high ground in political debates — wasted no time in delivering what they considered witty retorts to Prime Minister Imran Khan's much-cited pronouncement, when he was in the opposition, that he would rather kill himself than ask for money for the country. While Mr Khan's hyperbolic rhetoric in combination with his dramatic U-turns often exposes his government to mockery, it hardly elevates the standard of political discourse to respond in the same vein. Rather, matters are worsened by the fact that the subtle impact of such careless jibes, even when intending no offence, reinforce stigmas surrounding mental health and make light of the tragedy of suicide.

The issue here is not the prime minister's mental state, but the fact that in a country where mental health stressors such as abuse, conflict, poverty, etc are highly prevalent, and contribute significantly to the country's disease burden — impacting not just health but also productivity — joking about suicide betrays our political leaders' insensitivity and lack of awareness for an issue that affects an overwhelming number of Pakistanis. At a time of heightened economic anxiety when many are worried about how impending fiscal adjustments will affect their households, and since politicians rarely focus on policies to destigmatise and decriminalise mental illness, the least the latter can do is not seize upon this issue for political mileage. Being more mindful of how casual jokes can affect vulnerable groups won't rob political humour of its vigour, provided that public figures learn the comedic art of punching up, instead of down.

## Tax amnesty again

IF the past is any guide, tax amnesty schemes in Pakistan have been little more than revenue-generating exercises.

There is ample precedent to confirm this, given the large number of schemes that have come and gone in the past decade.

The leadership of the PTI rightly opposed all previous tax amnesties — not on narrow technical grounds, but on a point of principle.

It argued that such exercises were tantamount to the state kneeling before powerful criminal elements, besides making those complying with the tax laws feel like fools.

Today, the party may have its own reasons for bringing forward another amnesty scheme, but until the finance team shares further details, such as the impact it expects the scheme to have, it will have to be assumed that this is again more of a revenue-generating exercise than an actual attempt to document the economy.

The scheme raises questions for many reasons.

Barring minor tweaks here and there, the overall scheme is almost identical to the one announced by the then PML-N- government last year, which came under severe fire from the PTI.

One thing different this time is the subdued tone of the announcement.

Where the then finance adviser Miftah Ismail had used soaring rhetoric to describe his amnesty scheme, its objectives, and likely impact, Hafeez Shaikh, the current adviser, has only said that the intention of the scheme was to promote the documentation of the economy.

That is fine as an objective, if only there was evidence that such schemes do promote documentation.

The last time this scheme was used a year ago, it was similarly tagged as a documentation exercise. In hindsight, it is clear that it was no such thing, or else a second round would not be necessary today at such a short interval after the last one.

In fact, this is the fifth such scheme in the past five years, and the evidence from each exercise has been that it yields no meaningful results on the documentation side.

Only in some cases do these schemes yield a small amount as revenue for the state.

The last scheme was seen as successful because thousands of people and entities participated, and the revenue raised was around Rs80bn, which was enough to help the interim government tide over some of its expenses.

This time, there are reports that the government hopes to raise up to Rs300bn through the scheme, though there is no official confirmation of revenue expectations.

To boost participation, the scheme has opened the door to benami assets as well, which is dangerous because that is where the proceeds of crime are often hidden.

Even if the government means well, the amnesty scheme is a disappointment, and, learning from the past, it would be better if this is the last such endeavour.

## **Gulf tensions**

TENSIONS between the US and Iran, particularly in the Gulf, are rising and the situation has sent alarm bells ringing throughout the region.

It is in this context that Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said on Tuesday that Pakistan was “closely following the situation” and would take a stand “that best served the national interest”.

Pakistan is, of course, in a sensitive position as it has decades-old, deep relations with the US, while it shares a long border with Iran.

Moreover, this country’s ties with the Gulf Arabs — particularly the Saudis — who are firmly in the American camp, are also cordial and have a strategic and defence dimension.

In case of any hostilities, this country will rightly be concerned about its security and the stability of the region at large.

But perhaps the initial question is: what is the forecast of war? Though crystal-ball gazing can paint a deceptive picture, there is no denying that a war of words and a war of wills are raging in the Gulf between Iran and the US (and its allies).

While leading figures from both sides — Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran and Secretary Pompeo in the US — have said their respective sides are not interested in conflict, actions, particularly on the American end, tend to belie words.

For example, the US military build-up in the Gulf, harsh rhetoric from President Trump, as well as accusations from the US that Iran was responsible for ‘sabotaging’ several oil tankers off the UAE port of Fujairah recently (without presenting any solid evidence) all serve to prove that Washington may indeed be building a case for war against Iran.

Further indications of heightened tensions came on Wednesday, when reports emerged that the US was pulling “non-emergency” employees from Iraq, which borders Iran.

It is welcome that all sides say they do not want war.

But these intentions need to be strengthened through confidence-building measures and a genuine effort to lower tensions.

The US must shed its combative rhetoric and end its economic blockade and engage Iran with respect if it genuinely seeks a modus vivendi.

Tehran, on the other hand, should respond and give negotiations a chance.

As stated above, Pakistan is placed in a unique position.

Perhaps it can use its good offices to mediate between Washington and Tehran, and ward off a potentially catastrophic conflict that has the potential of setting the whole region alight.



## Everyday sexism

CRICKETER Shahid Afridi seems to have ruffled quite a few feathers since the release of his autobiography. Colourful, confrontational and anything but politically correct, the book mirrors his career in a way, and it continues to make headlines.

In fact, a new controversy has erupted over his remarks about not permitting his daughters to play outdoor sports.

“The feminists can say what they want; as a conservative Pakistani father, I’ve made my decision,” he stated.

This assertion from the former captain of the Pakistan cricket team is not exactly surprising or out of character.

In the past, he has made similar remarks, in response to a question about his thoughts on women playing cricket in Peshawar.

He ‘joked’ that Pakistani women are great cooks, implying that they belong in the kitchen, not in the cricket field.

As a public figure and a sportsman admired by millions, Afridi is a role model.

When he makes such flippant, derisive and patronising remarks, they are many who give credence to them.

Since the recent backlash, Afridi has defended himself by saying that he has the right to his personal life and decisions.

Everyone has the right to their views, but such regressive opinions should also continue to be challenged when publicly stated.

Even if such beliefs are held by many ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ Pakistani parents under the guise of ‘cultural values’ or out of a paternalistic concern for girls’ safety that infantilises them well into adulthood, it is important to remember that cultures are not static.

They evolve with time, and this is true in every part of the world.

There is a reason why it is mostly men who are the 'stars' in history books, while the names of women disappear into the annals.

For many, women can only be accepted in society as long as they maintain supporting roles — in the background, or entirely invisible, helping men achieve their potential, while having their own dreams crushed.

## **Dollar blues in the market**

THE dollar shot up in both markets on Thursday, touching Rs148 in interbank and open market trade briefly before settling at Rs146.

Considering it had opened at slightly above Rs141, the drop was significant, and anxiety has been stoked about what is to come.

The last devaluation had not been fully factored into the price level yet, and already we have seen another massive drop, with all indications pointing towards continued volatility.

The prime minister should note that the steep fall in the value of the rupee came the very day after he met with a delegation from the exchange companies of Pakistan and urged them to help reign the volatility in.

The markets seem to have shrugged off the prime minister's appeal very swiftly.

We could chalk it up to hoarding and speculation, were it not for the fact that we have seen all this before.

The morning of Thursday all of the silent supports that the State Bank provides to the exchange rate were suddenly withdrawn, and the banks were told to let the rupee find its own value.

This is a clear indication that the State Bank not only knew about the devaluation, but in fact let it happen by design. This is exactly how it has worked in all previous devaluations as well.

What is new this time is that the government has just signed a staff level agreement with the IMF that speaks of "prior conditions" and the need to move towards a "market determined exchange rate", and that there is a

new State Bank governor who is more likely to take these commitments seriously.

These observations beg a couple of important questions.

Will the silent supports that the State Bank has provided to the rupee return once the dollar hits a certain level, like has happened in the past, or are we going all the way this time towards a “market determined exchange rate”?

Is the new State Bank governor, the young Raza Baqir who has not seen the world from any vantage point other than that of the IMF for the past 16 years, up to the task of dealing with the seasoned sharks that operate in the country’s foreign exchange markets?

Does he understand the rackets that operate just below the surface, both in the interbank and especially the open market?

If not, we could all be in for a turbulent ride in the move towards a “market determined exchange rate”.

Finally, how prepared is the prime minister himself to manage the forthcoming adjustment, considering this is only the beginning?

He was urging restraint upon the exchange companies at the same moment as the State Bank was preparing to let the rupee fall in the interbank market.

It is important to ask whether these two actions were coordinated or not.

## **Taking to the streets**

FOLLOWING JUI-F chief Fazlur Rehman’s declaration of open season on the government, and mixed signals from the PML-N in this regard, PPP co-chairperson Asif Ali Zardari is now the latest political leader to announce a street protest against the ruling PTI. On Wednesday, the former president said the government has “fabricated” cases against him, compelling his party to resort to public agitation after Eid. At present, NAB is proceeding against Mr Zardari in 36 different cases, out of which the bureau claims to have established his role in eight. The so-called fake accounts

investigation hinges on benami accounts through which money was allegedly laundered.

From the very beginning of this case, Mr Zardari and members of his party have denounced the matter as a politically motivated witch hunt contrived to weaken his position. In fact, when the JIT report in this saga was finalised, the PPP boss responded to the court by rejecting the allegations of the FIA, claiming the agency is being used by the ruling party to humiliate him. In parliament, too, he has hit out at NAB and asked for its chairman to seek permission from the assembly before proceeding against a lawmaker. It is evident that Mr Zardari is using politics to fight personal battles. With both the judicial arena and parliamentary forum still available to the former president, it is particularly striking that Mr Zardari would consider resorting to a lockdown situation to challenge these cases. Even if he feels the cases are unfair and politically motivated, he would be well advised to fight them in court or, alternatively, use the strength of the opposition in parliament to challenge them politically. A protest in the country at this stage would not only be short-sighted but also give impetus to undemocratic forces. The incumbent government — whose party was severely criticised for its anti-government lockdown so early into the PML-N's last tenure — has not completed even the first of its five-year term. Such a protest would chip away at both the economy and at the democratic project, which has very recently begun to find its feet. Therefore, it is neither the right time nor the right reason for street agitation. While political protest is very much their democratic right, the opposition parties must acknowledge that they also have a responsibility to ensure that the democratic process prevails — and what better place for that than parliament?

## **Palestine's catastrophe**

WEDNESDAY was observed as the 71st anniversary of the Nakba, the event the Palestinians remember as the 'catastrophe' that led to their seemingly eternal banishment from their homeland, and the beginning of unending brutalities and humiliation heaped upon them by Israel. In typical fashion, Israel marked the day by wounding around 50 Palestinians — who had marched to the Israel-Gaza border to demand the reunification of their

land — using live rounds on the marchers. It was sheer good fortune that none of the demonstrators were killed. Sadly, it appears as if the Palestinian dream to live as a free people in a homeland of their own will remain unrealised, as there seems to be no one ready to call out Israel for its atrocious behaviour and grave human rights abuses. This is despite the fact that the UN has said that Israel's vicious tactics against the Palestinians — over 200 Arabs have been killed since March 2018 by the Zionist state — may constitute war crimes. But who will have the courage to take Israel to task, when its biggest benefactor sitting in the White House is willing to whitewash all its crimes, and in fact 'reward' it by recognising its illegal occupation of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights?

The Arab-Israeli peace process as we know it is dead, and Tel Aviv under Netanyahu has performed its last rites by crushing the Palestinians and burying the two-state solution. It seems the hopes raised by the Oslo process in the 1990s were false; all that the Palestinians have received in return for agreeing to make peace with Israel is more humiliation, more violence and more illegal annexation of their land. And now, to add insult to injury, the Trump administration is preparing a 'deal of the century' that, if details leaked are to be believed, will make the ghettoisation of the Palestinians permanent, deny them their right over Jerusalem, and present prime Arab land to Israel on a platter. The catastrophe unleashed by the Nakba, it seems, shows no sign of ending.

## **Free market jitters**

THE financial markets are extremely alarmed after two full days of an unsupported exchange rate that has seen the open market rate rise to beyond Rs150 and the stock market witness accelerating declines. The adviser to the prime minister on finance, Hafeez Shaikh, met a delegation from the stock market in Karachi, and the same brokers later went to the State Bank for another meeting with the new governor. The brokers' concerns are rudimentary: they want the state to protect them from further losses as the stock market declines. In order to make this case, the brokers have been adept at presenting their vested interests as the interests of the country; they have played this game for many years now.

But the brokers are not the only ones who are agitated over the direction in which matters are headed. Bankers and industry leaders are worried about what new exchange rate regime is being ushered in and what direction interest rates will take, and more broadly, how far the new management of the country's economy intends to go towards letting the market make crucial decisions. They are still busy absorbing the implications of Thursday's exchange rate action, and now a monetary policy announcement next Monday looms before them. Needless to say, for many in business and finance, the weekend will be far from relaxing.

If the financial system is really going to be made more responsive to market conditions, it is now important to ask how far this is going to go. Back in the 1990s, when we had a fiercely independent State Bank governor, who had also been brought in from the IMF, even cut-off yields in T Bill auctions used to be determined by the market. If the exchange rate is to be determined similarly from this point on, how about interest rates, or cut-off yields on government debt? Does it make sense to make only a part of the financial system responsive to market conditions? The new State Bank governor has to ask himself this question when listening to the concerns of the stockbrokers and the exchange companies. In the days to come, more and more segments of the business community, particularly those who have high levels of organised representation of their interests, will step forward with their fears and seek to persuade the finance adviser and the State Bank governor to change their mind, or at least grant some special protections and exemptions to their core interests from the adjustment that lies ahead. In responding to these entreaties, an important signal will be sent to everybody else, and the leadership needs to bear this in mind when considering the requests that the brokers have brought forward. Ideally, Dr Shaikh ought to help the brokers understand that public money cannot be used to bail out private interests.

## **SC on Karachi**

WHILE hearing a case regarding illegal encroachments in Karachi, the Supreme Court recently issued a detailed order that is a stinging indictment of all those in power, and what they have done with this megacity. As one of the learned justices commented, Karachi has been

turned into a “big slum” with no trees, proper roads or playgrounds. “There is on all roads ... filth, heaps of garbage, sewerage water. ...” the order reads. Indeed, for residents of this forsaken city, this is not news; however, it is welcome that the apex court has taken note of Karachi’s plight. The fact is that all three tiers of government — the centre, the Sindh government and the KMC — have failed to maintain cleanliness and develop infrastructure in Sindh’s capital and Pakistan’s economic heart. While other major cities in the country have received or are in the process of building modern commuter bus and train systems, the people of Karachi have to risk their lives on decrepit smoke-belching hulks to get from point A to point B. Major thoroughfares are potholed, sewage overflows regularly, and solid waste disposal and management is an alien concept in this city. The neglect has been sustained for decades, save for a few years of development during the Musharraf era. Those in power in Islamabad have remained aloof to Karachi’s plight, preferring to announce ‘packages’ for the city that never seem to materialise. The provincial government’s neglect of the city is appalling, especially as the PPP-led set-up has usurped municipal services from the local bodies. And the MQM-led KMC, which claims having limited powers and funds, cannot escape censure, as in the past prime tracts of the city’s land — parks, amenity plots etc — were gobbled up under the odious practice colloquially known as ‘china cutting’, overseen by the Muttahida. So in Karachi’s case, no hands are clean, and it is the citizens who have been left in the lurch.

To rectify this mess, the Supreme Court has called upon the Sindh chief minister, the mayor and all civic agencies to sit together and save Karachi from “massive collapse”. These are wise words, and perhaps the process can begin by granting the local government in Karachi full municipal powers to oversee water, waste disposal and other civic matters. The Sindh government should have a supervisory role, and while it may take decades to fix Karachi, the first steps towards this objective need to be taken promptly.

## **KP doctors’ strike**

AS doctors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa continue their province-wide strike for the fourth day, the government has once again warned them to return to

work or face action. But with no negotiation process in sight, and neither side willing to back down from its position, there is no saying how much longer the strike will go on for, or what the outcome will be. The doctor's foremost demand is for the police to register an FIR against the provincial health minister, Dr Hisham Inamullah Khan. Dr Khan is reported to be responsible for an altercation that left an assistant professor, Dr Ziauddin Afridi, bruised and bloodied. Prior to this incident that made national headlines, resentment had been simmering under the surface. Dr Afridi had been trying to communicate with the architect of the KP health reforms Dr Nausherwan Burki about a promotion he apparently did not receive for a while. Frustrated at not being heard, he attempted to hurl eggs at Dr Burki as a last resort. To resolve matters, apparently, the health minister then approached Dr Afridi with his security guards — only for matters to take a turn for the worse.

Since the passing of several reforms introduced in the previous tenure, there has been growing resentment among doctors who felt their service structure has been disturbed. The autonomy of public hospitals has been handed to a board of governors, which many felt introduced an arbitrary system when it came to promotion and practice, and there are reportedly few cheques and balances in place. They believe the US-based Dr Burki is transporting an alien system to KP, without taking the ground realities into consideration. Another major point of resentment includes transfers on the basis of domiciles under the district health authority plan. In the blame game that is currently under way, it is the poor patients who cannot afford private healthcare that are suffering the most. For their sake alone, the government and doctor's bodies must sit down and reach a compromise.

## **Gas price hike**

THERE is little doubt that the gas sector, particularly its pricing regime, is badly in need of reform and overhaul. Most reform-minded people also agree that whatever shape these reforms take, a hike in the price of natural gas is inevitable. To some extent, this has to be accepted by the consumers. For far too long, we have been lying to ourselves about natural gas. We have been telling ourselves that gas is cheap and abundant — whereas in reality, it is precious and scarce. The chief instrument through



which this untruth has been propagated is the price, which for domestic consumers has been so low that it has encouraged a culture of waste. All this has to change.

But there are two situations in which an increase in gas prices is simply unacceptable. The first is when gas is taxed to fill a hole in the fiscal framework. The second is when the price is increased to pay for the inefficiencies and guaranteed returns on assets for the two public-sector distribution companies. Considerable pressure is building up on the gas price as the regulator Ogra has submitted the second of its biannual gas price determinations, and found that both distribution companies deserve to be allowed to sell their natural gas at significantly higher rates. For the northern region, controlled by SNGPL, the proposed hike is up to 47pc; and for the southern region, controlled by SSGC, it is 28pc. The regulator has justified this on the basis of the exchange rate depreciation.

Meanwhile, the government should note that generic price increases, without the attendant reform of the pricing mechanism and governance framework, are exercises in futility. There may well be a temptation to yield to gas price increases, particularly in light of the IMF programme signed recently, which is going to make it more difficult to use fiscal resources to plug the revenue gaps of public-sector enterprises, including the gas companies. So, while passing the costs of all the losses, the inefficiencies and theft to consumers may appear to be an attractive proposition, it would be a mistake to do so because, with everything else remaining as it is, these entities will simply keep returning for higher tariffs while doing very little — if anything at all — to improve their own performance. What is needed is a new gas-pricing mechanism that steadily pushes the regulator out of this job and allows market forces to play a larger role. Following this, governance reforms that make performance the benchmark of success for the management of these companies are also critical. This is a moment for the government to reflect on the above and to advance a vision for the holistic reform of the gas sector. Once that is done, price hikes will be much easier to digest.

## Crackdown on militants

IT is a predictable pattern: violence by militants followed by the state unleashing its might to eliminate them. So it is once again in Balochistan. In the wake of a blood-soaked few weeks in the troubled province, security forces on Thursday launched an operation in the Mastung area, killing nine suspected militants who are said to have belonged to a banned organisation. Four security personnel also sustained injuries in the exchange of gunfire. Balochistan has been the staging ground for several deadly attacks within the space of a month. Most were claimed by either banned Baloch militant organisations or the (also proscribed) TTP. On April 18, around a dozen gunmen belonging to an alliance of Baloch separatist groups murdered 14 bus passengers in Gwadar district; 11 of them were personnel belonging to the navy, air force and Coast Guards. On May 12, armed assailants stormed Pearl Continental in the heavily secured Gwadar city; five people — including four hotel security guards and a navy official — lost their lives while the militants themselves were killed. BLA claimed responsibility. Two attacks during this period targeted the FC; at least five died in the line of duty. On April 12, 10 were killed and 48 injured in a bombing attack against the long-suffering Hazaras in Quetta.

Even for Balochistan, sadly no stranger to violence, this is a particularly gruesome tally. It seems that militants of all stripe, religious extremists as well as separatists, are determined to continue their battle against the state and prove they have the wherewithal to do so. The remote, inhospitable reaches of Balochistan are ideal for outlaws to retreat and recoup, and remain under the radar while planning their next move. Using force to deal with them, while staying within the bounds of the law, is no doubt necessary. However, where the Baloch separatists are concerned, believing that a militarised approach alone will neutralise them once and for all betrays a fundamental lack of understanding about the 'Baloch problem' — even a lack of imagination. It ignores the fact that at its core this is a political issue that needs a political solution to be durable. Unfortunately, no serious and sincere attempt has yet been made by the state to engage with the disgruntled elements among the Baloch, even through intermediaries. In the absence of such moves, the disaffection among the local population will continue to grow and fuel the insurgency.

## Journalistic ethics

ON Friday, PPP Punjab president Qamar Zaman Kaira's son was killed in a car accident, along with his friend. To lose a child is one of the greatest sorrows to befall a parent, and messages of condolence began pouring in. Along with these expressions of grief, however, there was an outpouring of disgust at the way the news was broken to the father.

At a news conference in Islamabad, Mr Kaira learnt about a personal tragedy in a very public way as his private grief was broadcast live on television channels. As the cameras rolled, a journalist could be heard saying he had bad news regarding his son, "God have mercy". When Mr Kaira inquired who, unable to hear clearly, another journalist informed him that his son had been in an accident. The visibly shocked politician excused himself from the conference, to make his way back to his constituency. At such a sensitive moment, perhaps the graceful thing to do would have been to take the father to the side and inform him privately. But in the age of breaking news, 24/7 broadcasting of human misery, near-constant vilification of ideological opponents and traditional politicians, and a voyeurism that blurs the boundary between the private and public selves, it seems that our sense of decency and dignity have been forgotten somewhere amongst all the noise.

This event should serve as a moment for reflection within the journalist community.

After years of campaigning, a national code of conduct for journalism was launched not too long ago. The six principles agreed upon were: truth and accuracy; pluralism; independence, fairness and impartiality; confidentiality and privacy; accountability and good governance; and finally, humanity and the duty to do no harm. There have been discussions on TV channels introducing stricter editorial controls and installing time-delay mechanisms during live broadcasts. Yet we keep seeing instances of violations of these principles. In the age of information, empathy should not become the casualty.

## Back on track?

FRIDAY'S derailment of a goods train near Padidan station in Sindh has been blamed on 'issues' with the track, reigniting the old debate about the need to reform the train infrastructure in the country. The incident badly affected rail traffic over vast areas between Karachi and Peshawar for several hours. On Saturday, the railways minister held a news conference in Lahore at which, along with going through the usual exercise of listing the steps taken by his government to prop up the sagging rail system in the country, he wistfully recalled what could have been done to avoid the predicament the train service faces today. Quite naturally, there was mention of the much-anticipated Main Line-1 plan that is considered vital to not just Pakistan Railways' future health, but also to its very existence.

The minister was right when he pointed to the almost obsessive focus of the railways department on ML-1. But, at this stage, the focus is likely to remain in all plans to revive the railways. Indeed, others before Shaikh Rashid, too, have spoken equally loudly about the state of the railways and of plans to fix it. After years of rhetoric, however, the main solution seems to lie in the execution of ML-1 under CPEC — the experts seemed to have been agonising hopelessly until they took note of what they see as a financially viable option. It could pull the railways out of years of neglect and exploitation and help it shrug off its lethargy and the conspiracies hatched to benefit others in the business of transportation, as well as PR's own parasites.

ML-1 is not really a secret that needs decoding. It is a simple remedy tied to the larger picture that involves Pakistan's trade with China and beyond. It entails re-laying the track from Karachi to Peshawar along with carrying out other repairs to existing lines and adding to the number of trains. This work at the basic level is supposed to give the system a much-needed lift by raising the standard of services. Both goods and passenger trains are to benefit, while the safety of the tracks is expected to be doubly ensured. The previous government was very keen on moving ahead on the ML-1 project, which is to be followed by the locally funded ML-2 and ML-3. The current government has signed the basic documents and is hoping to start work soon on ML-1. The railways minister has indicated that although ML-1 will take time to materialise, other work aimed at lifting the railways would

continue. He has spoken of “30 new trains” launched under his watch. All that is fine, but he must also be willing to come up with plans to fix the less visible problems — like damaged tracks — that constantly threaten PR with derailment.

## **PayPal refusal**

AMERICAN online payment giant PayPal will not be coming to Pakistan, a Senate committee was told last week. Despite the government’s efforts to convince the company, which is a widely popular system supporting online money transfers, the IT secretary said it is not ready to enter Pakistan “due to its internal working”. The announcement comes after former finance minister Asad Umar vowed to bring PayPal to Pakistan shortly after the PTI formed the government — a promise that had generated hope and excitement at home about the possible entry of a company of this stature. PayPal’s refusal has come as a blow to the local freelance community, which is said to be bringing considerably high revenue for Pakistan. These freelancers sell their services in the online marketplace for projects which are outsourced by international clients for development in Pakistan. A trusted and convenient payment gateway like PayPal not only makes it easier for local freelancers to receive payments for projects, but also encourages international customers to make these payments electronically to a system which is secure. Currently, PayPal operates in about 190 markets around the world and is a recognised gateway which is used to send money, make online payments, receive money or set up a merchant account. Many registered users place their trust in the digital gateway because of its efficient dispute-resolution system that avoids the conventional bureaucratic processes of banks which largely rely on tedious documentation.

Although PayPal’s refusal is disappointing, it should also push the government to make a renewed effort to expand Pakistan’s promising e-commerce industry. First, the government must share details about PayPal’s reluctance to enter Pakistan at this stage. If it is indeed due to its internal processes, the government should pay attention to the gaps in the system which can be filled to make Pakistan a lucrative and safe market for PayPal. Second, in the absence of PayPal, the government must

support local e-commerce players by facilitating companies to innovate payment platforms which appeal to international clients. Traditional small-scale enterprises should be encouraged to sell online to international consumers, and international buyers should be provided a system they can trust. The State Bank's high licence fee which discourages innovation in this space must be revisited. The outlook of the government should be geared towards boosting the confidence of local sellers — otherwise, it will risk losing out on revenue.

## **Mothers in parliament**

EARLIER this month, Mahjabeen Shereen, a member of the Balochistan Assembly, was faced with a dilemma that plagues every working mother: sacrifice either her child's needs or her professional obligations.

She opted for neither, instead bringing her unwell infant into the chamber, maintaining her attendance record to effectively represent her constituents on the reserved seat she was elected on last year.

Rather than being supportive, however, her colleagues are said to have chastised the MPA, forcing her to leave the session, despite posing no disruption to the proceedings.

Prior to this incident, MPA Shereen said she had asked the assembly secretary for a spare room to be converted into a day-care facility — a request that was denied.

It is shameful that in a country of historical firsts — three decades ago, Benazir Bhutto became not only the first elected female leader of a Muslim country, but also the first elected leader in the world to give birth in office — progress for women lawmakers from less illustrious backgrounds has remained stagnant.

In a profession that remains stubbornly male, affirmative actions isolated from a holistic policy of inclusion are merely tokenistic.

Though electoral laws on voting and representation guarantee at least a minimum benchmark of political participation, little thought has been given to aspects of political and legislative rules, both official and implicit, that

effectively discriminate against the female experience, including motherhood.

In a modern Pakistan, however, legislatures should be inclusive and reflect the realities of the diverse population they represent.

There are many parliamentary precedents from other countries to refer to which dispute assertions of impracticalities; environmental and procedural measures that account for lawmakers of all socioeconomic backgrounds, family structures and abilities — in this case, not assuming that all parliamentarian parents have the luxury, or desire, to leave their child with another caregiver.

Two years ago in Islamabad, a day-care centre was inaugurated in Parliament House — another first. It is well past time to ensure it is not the only among Pakistan's legislatures.

## **Monetary policy hike**

THE State Bank shrugged off pressure from vested interests on Monday when it decided to raise the discount rate by a massive 1.5pc, sending shock waves through the business community that is already struggling with rising costs from inflation and devaluation, and must now prepare for even higher debt-service costs. The rate hike will also hit government finances for next year as it will raise debt-service expenditure that is already the fastest-growing item in expenditures all through this fiscal year. It is now clear that it will remain the fastest-growing item in government expenditures all through next year as well.

The central bank did the right thing by disregarding the entreaties for restraint in the cycle of monetary tightening that has been under way since January 2018. The stock market brokers have taken the lead in trying to impact the direction of monetary policy at the State Bank, even meeting the new governor on Saturday in an effort to influence him on the interest and exchange rate policy, among other things. But the State Bank has to take a holistic view of the economy, and not one based on the narrow considerations of a section of the business community. On many occasions, it has to take unpopular decisions keeping in mind what is necessary to prevent the growing imbalances and deficits in the economy

from getting out of control. Continuously rising inflation combined with runaway fiscal and external-sector deficits can lead the country towards a severe balance-of-payments crisis that would include massive capital flight and a potential run on the banks. The country came perilously close to this situation in 2008, and must never flirt with such outcomes again. The State Bank can prevent a repeat of that episode only if it continues to act independently in such matters and shows its willingness to take the steps that are necessary to avert such crises, no matter how unpopular the measures might be.

In its accompanying statement, the State Bank has painted a bleak picture of what is to come. Inflation has continued to rise despite ferocious monetary tightening all throughout 2018, the statement says, adding that “inflationary pressures are likely to continue for some time”. Next year, inflation is expected to be “considerably higher” due to a forthcoming “rationalisation of taxes” in the budget coming up, expected hikes in power and gas tariffs, and possible increases in international oil prices. The realities the statement describes include stubborn and persistent inflation, a rising fiscal deficit that is being monetised and financed with the printing of money, and an external-sector deficit that is being narrowed mainly through import controls and remittances, whereas exports are stagnant in dollar terms. With such a heavy menu, the market should prepare for further monetary tightening in the months ahead.

## **Opposition protest**

THE opposition has gathered on one platform and the power maps are out one more time. This is how it has been in this country routinely. The 11-party meeting hosted by the PPP leaders in Islamabad on Sunday has more or less confirmed that the unhappy opposition parties are ready to close ranks to fight for a common cause. The signs are that this could well be the beginning of yet another street agitation stemming from the acrimonious relationship between the rulers and the opposition. Unfortunately, it seems that the days where one could propose and oppose and move ahead in parliament elude us. Various views were discussed at the PPP’s iftar party. Whereas the so-called radicals associated with the PTM came up with the basic demand of adhering to



the Constitution, one participant spoke of involving traders from Karachi to Khyber in street protests. This indicates the impatience and intent in the ranks of the opposition.

The focus will now be on a multiparty meeting to be hosted by the JUI-F's Maulana Fazlur Rehman after Eid, which may finalise the details (basically who will be placed where on the jalsa stage) before a call is given to the public to come out on the streets. At the news conference which followed the meeting, the PML-N's Shahid Khaqan Abbasi tried to explain the issues that have brought the opposition together. He reiterated how the opposition believed that last year's election was controversial, and said that the government had put the 'country's sovereignty' at risk. Over and above that, Mr Abbasi said that the opposition was not being given the right to speak in parliament. His argument was that the only choice the opposition was left with was to have talks with the government on the roads. Mr Abbasi has a valid point. The PTI is not exactly the most efficient of political parties when it comes to running the assemblies. Amid the fresh posturing for combat on the national front, one of the toughest and most crucial tasks for the Imran Khan government would be to disprove this contention of the opposition having been denied room and relevance in parliament. That might cause a rethink among opposition members and allow them to concentrate on the battle within the legislature. Indeed, while protest is their democratic right, at a time of economic uncertainty and pressures on democracy, debate and protest within parliament would be a more sensible option.

## **ODI drubbing**

THE Pakistan cricket team's World Cup preparations have run into difficulties, thanks to the 0-4 England drubbing in the five-match ODI series that concluded at Headingley on Sunday. Not among the leading ODI sides, the Pakistanis were always the underdogs in the series. However, with the kind of talent in their ranks and the three-week training in England, they were tipped to give their hosts a run for their money. That did not happen. The sketchy show put up by Sarfraz Ahmed and his men could at best be described as unprofessional. They appeared to be in disarray — uncertain, hesitant and weighed down by one defeat after another. With

the World Cup now less than 10 days away, it is clear that the Pakistanis have much work to do, and many knots to untie. Several of those knots pertain to the usual suspects — injuries, poor form and a lack of self-belief. They seem to be caught in their own bubble where old failings such as substandard bowling and atrocious fielding have been exposed yet again. Not surprisingly, the media and fans have been unsparing. So much so that the landmark Champions Trophy win in 2017 is now dubbed a ‘fluke’.

Of course, there are lessons to be learnt. The tormenting of bowlers, the shoddy fielding and incongruity among players ought to be dissected for improved results at the World Cup. Having said that, what has helped the team retain some of its competitive spirit is the welcome turnaround in batting. For decades, batting had been the Achilles heel of Pakistan cricket, but the batsmen have surprised everyone by mustering totals in excess of 340 in three consecutive games against England bowling, a feat hitherto unaccomplished by the national team. The top order — Fakhar Zaman, Imam-ul-Haq and Babar Azam — hit hundreds in the ODI series while the middle order — Asif Ali, Haris Sohail, Mohammad Hafeez and Sarfraz — provided heartening support. Hopefully, the return of a fully fit Mohammad Amir and Shadab Khan will give Pakistan the confidence to relaunch the World Cup campaign.

## **Report on torture in IHK**

A DAMNING report detailing the Indian army’s alleged torture of Kashmiri protesters has been made public this week, underscoring the sheer scale of the methods employed by the state to quell dissent in India-held Kashmir. Titled Torture: Indian State’s Instrument of Control, the 560-page report, compiled by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons and the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, records human rights abuses over the past decade in the disputed region. The report is the first of its kind, documenting 432 case studies against the backdrop of what it describes as the systematic and indiscriminate torture perpetuated by security forces in occupied Kashmir. The cases mentioned in the report are records of torture, with a focus on “patterns, targets, perpetrators, contexts and impact of torture in Kashmir”.

The accounts are chilling: “Forms of torture include stripping the detainees naked, beatings with wooden sticks, iron rods or leather belts, roller treatment whereby a heavy wooden log or an iron rod is rolled over the legs of the detainee, with extra weight applied to it by forces personnel who sit on the opposite sides of this rod, water-boarding, electrocution, hanging from the ceiling, dunking detainees’ head in water, burning of the body with iron rods, heaters or cigarette butts, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, sexualised torture including rape and sodomy, among others.” Grimly, the report notes that not a single case has been prosecuted. It also says that a lack of faith in institutions prevents victims from seeking justice or redressal for the torture. At the end, it calls on the United Nations to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate what it says is the endemic use of torture by government forces.

It is evident from this report that an immediate investigation must be launched by the UN to determine the extent to which the Indian army in occupied Kashmir is using torture on Kashmiri youths to suppress their struggle for self-determination. It is not enough that the Indian government is “looking into it”, as they have said in response to the report’s publication. Last year, the UN had called for an independent probe into the violation of Kashmiris’ rights in a report — a call rejected by India. This fresh report, which has been hailed as “landmark” by a former UN special rapporteur on torture, demonstrates the need for finding a solution that will end this reign of normalised torture that India has inflicted on the Kashmiri people. Although the report is the first documentation on this scale, it is not the first time India has been accused of rights’ violations in Kashmir. The Indian government simply cannot ignore calls by human rights groups — both local and international — which draw attention to these inhuman practices. It will risk further alienating an already crushed section of the population if it continues with its abhorrent practices.

## **Police powers in Sindh**

THE amendments to the 2002 Police Order in Sindh are hardly an open-and-shut case. It is a larger question of who calls the shots in policing matters. The tussle is not confined to the workings of the police. There have been other victims of the same desire to control, such as the local

government system which is only a ghost of its original self. Indeed, many link this battle for control over the police in Sindh with the ideal of autonomy at all levels. Sindh's case has been complicated by the presence of additional elements at work, such as court orders that have defied all attempts by the PPP-led setup in the province to use the services of the police to advance its own interests. The intervention in the form of the amendments that came on Saturday was due for a long time, given the frustration shown by Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's government. The amendments, which do not come into effect until the Sindh governor puts his seal on them, seek to take away some crucial powers from the police and place them with the elected government. For example, the proposed changes bind the IGP to get the provincial government's approval to transfer and post senior officers in the province. What has been more vociferously criticised is that the law would give "arbitrary authority" to the provincial government to send the police chief to the federal government.

Experts have said that the new document is very different from the original one. The PPP government in the province has been blamed for destroying some of the basic features of what was hailed by some as a people-friendly law. The critics include the IGP Sindh who is on record as having objected to the change on account of its being against the spirit of the order. There cannot be any compromise on the efficiency and the independence of the police force. But it is also worrying when a provincial setup fears that it may be held hostage by hostile officials. Both these views have to be given due weight if an attempt is to be made to avoid yet another controversy about law and order in Sindh. In the end, the provincial government will have to learn to share power with others. At the same time, there should be no attempt by the centre or others to treat the Sindh setup unfairly, especially in comparison to others in the country.

## **Polio reforms**

AFTER the hysteria over anti-polio vaccines in Peshawar led to a sudden spike in refusals, Pakistan's polio programme heads believed there was a need for evaluation of how the campaign is conducted at the grass roots. When it comes to eradicating polio, one case is one too many. Following the large number of refusals after the last anti-polio drive, there has

naturally been an increase in the number of new polio cases reported throughout the country. Just five months into 2019, and there have already been 17 cases of the virus reported. In 2018, there were 12 reported cases of polio. In 2017, the figure was the lowest it has ever been recorded at just eight. Several interviews with front-line workers and their supervisors by the polio programme have led to the formulation of new reforms which will be in effect for the next campaign in June. Namely, front-line workers will no longer be expected to carry the burden of heavy data collection, but simply focus on administrating the vaccine.

Where they previously had to carry a large register of questions — and in many conservative households, the questions were perceived to be too intrusive — they will now carry a single piece of paper that serves as a tally of who has been administered the anti-polio drops, and who remains to be administered within a single household. The number of visits to households by polio workers has also been reduced: one visit from the front-line workers, and the second time as a follow-up by the supervisors in charge. These reforms are being complemented by a government campaign against disinformation regarding vaccines by bringing social media giants into the fold, as much of the disinformation was spread through social media propaganda. The changes will certainly ease some of the burden on the front-line workers who face a host of challenges, resistance, and hostility for simply doing their job, but whether they are effective in combating the virus in the long run remains to be seen.

## **The price of indecision**

THE numbers tell a harrowing tale that no amount of spin can hide. Revenues and exports have been flat for the first nine and 10 months of the fiscal year respectively. Even though imports are shrinking and bringing down the overall current account deficit, there are indications that this is happening more as a consequence of the overall slowdown of the economy than any government initiative. Ordinary people do not need any reminding that inflation is rising sharply, and from the looks of it, the situation is even worse in the rural areas where the costs of agricultural inputs are skyrocketing. What the latest round of data released

simultaneously by the State Bank and the finance ministry tells us is that there is more to come.

The data shows that the fiscal deficit has come in at 5pc of GDP in the first nine months of the financial year, the highest it has been in well over a decade. This puts the government in the unenviable position of having to announce huge tax hikes at a time when the economy is reeling from massive devaluation and a sharp interest rate hike. This is the price of indecision. For all these nine months, the PTI leadership spoke of having inherited a crisis, but did little to manage it. The prime minister, perhaps inadvertently, ended up conveying to global audiences that there were challenges to investing in Pakistan because of the culture of corruption that he now intended to change. To draw the attention of foreign investors to Pakistan, a more restrained approach would help. FDI, meanwhile, is down by almost 50pc.

Of course, much of this is cyclical. Every incoming government in Pakistan has found an economy plagued with massive imbalances requiring emergency support from the IMF. And they have all begun their terms with an IMF programme, while repeating the words 'we inherited a broken economy'. But having done so, they have all been required to take decisive action, as the short-term impact is to stifle growth while laying the groundwork for a revival in the medium term. Of course, they have all failed to implement the long-term structural reforms that are necessary to make this growth sustainable, which is the reason we keep finding ourselves returning to this place over and over again. The present government has been indecisive from the start, and having delayed the inevitable for so long, it is now in the peculiar position of having to make a new beginning nine months into its term. Nevertheless, now that the difficult decisions are finally being made, and the bitter medicine is being served, the government must show its resolve. If it fails to own the decisions being made by its new, technocratic team, the numbers could tell an even more dismal tale down the road.

## **Gendered insults**

IT is not uncommon for political rivals in the country to make unsavoury personal remarks about each other as a means of criticism.

In fact, it is a reality we witness ever so often on television or social media when party representatives hurl below-the-belt insults at one another.

This behaviour was once again demonstrated in the past week, this time by PML-N leader Talal Chaudhry, who used distasteful words to criticise Firdous Ashiq Awan, the prime minister's special assistant on information.

In what appears to be a rather weak attempt at a pun on the PTI's 'tabdeeli' mantra, Mr Chaudhry made a nasty remark about Ms Awan's physical appearance.

The remarks are recorded in a short clip — that has gone viral online — in which the politician is speaking directly to the person holding the camera.

Hours later, after a social media backlash in which Twitter users demanded an apology, Mr Chaudhry tweeted saying that while his intention was not to degrade anyone, he “apologises” if his remarks were deemed inappropriate.

Contrary to what Mr Chaudhry may believe, ad hominem and gendered criticisms like his are often uttered with the intention to demean an opponent.

Not only are personal attacks highly inappropriate, they expose the speaker's regressive outlook on how a woman or man ought to look or behave and belittle their professional capability.

While Mr Chaudhry implied that Ms Awan is not feminine, we have also seen politicians — including the prime minister — criticise rivals by suggesting they are too feminine.

Even the National Assembly halls have echoed with outrageously sexist, personal comments — like the time when PML-N's Khawaja Asif made crude remarks about PTI's Shireen Mazari, or when Sheikh Rashid resorted to unbecoming comments about Benazir Bhutto.

Similarly, our social and virtual spaces are often dominated by people who make derogatory and disrespectful jokes largely targeting women, with the hope to raise a few laughs, but without any realisation of how poorly the words reflect on their intellect.

This was witnessed just a few days ago when social media commentary surrounding Maryam Nawaz's photos from the opposition's iftar gathering revolved around wedding jokes.

If they want to serve as role models, our politicians must shun lazy, offensive humour when hitting out at each other.

There are many more valid and intelligent jokes that can be cracked to criticise an opponent. Making fun of a fellow politician's physical appearance is unprofessional and unnecessary.

## **Farishta's murder**

NEWSPAPERS are routinely filled with reports of the brutal rape and murder of children. Every once in a while, however, a particular case manages to capture the nation's attention. The abduction, rape and murder of 10-year-old Farishta from Islamabad is one such case, and there has been widespread condemnation and outrage over how it was handled by the police. According to her family, the child went out to play on May 15 but did not return. Worried about her safety, the family approached the police, who sought to dismiss their fears. The Shahzad Town SHO told them she must have left consensually with someone, and they were subjected to several insensitive and bizarre questions, including being asked if she had eloped with someone. The brother of the girl pointed out how the police officer was playing with his own child when they had gone to register their complaint. On May 20, Farishta's body was found; her father had recognised her by her clothes. A photograph of a body began to make the rounds on social media that showed signs of torture. It was only when a politician raised the issue that the police registered an FIR — not before, when the parents had pleaded with them for four days. An inquiry is now under way, and the SHO has been suspended. An FIR has been registered against him and other policemen.

The diseased mind that snatched Farishta's life did not recognise her humanity or pain, but what is shocking is that those who were in charge of protecting her also could not see the same. How can a 10-year-old be expected to give consent? Why would the police officer bring up the possibility of elopement as if the victim was an adult woman capable of



making an adult decision? Whether the family's case was treated the way it was because of their ethnicity or socioeconomic status will remain a subject of debate. But the job of the police is to protect and serve all citizens.

## **After Modi's win**

FOR the world's largest democracy, the writing is on the wall: communal politics in India has triumphed in an age that will define the future of the republic.

Despite forecasts of failure from pundits who had predicted that India's economic challenges would chip away at Narendra Modi's vote bank, the ultra-nationalist BJP is poised to form government for another five years after a landslide victory in the Lok Sabha election.

The results are astounding, and depressingly show that religious hatred and sectarian politics can be exploited to lure voters.

Notably, the months leading up to Mr Modi's campaign were marked by anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan rants, with India going so far as to escalate tensions by conducting air strikes inside Pakistan in order to whip up nationalist sentiment.

Now that elections are over, we hope that Mr Modi will rein in his rhetoric that had encouraged Hindu extremist groups to step up their intimidation of minorities.

And the focus must turn to a practical way forward for sustainable peace in the subcontinent. This is possible solely through an unwavering commitment to dialogue, an offer Pakistan has extended — and India has rebuffed — consistently.

A day before the election results, a photograph capturing an exchange between Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj emerged from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, reigniting optimism about a thaw in relations between Pakistan and India.

Newspaper reports indicate that Ms Swaraj shared sweets and acknowledged that past conversations had been bitter.

Against this backdrop, there is speculation that the meeting could re-establish contact between Islamabad and Delhi after months of plunging relations.

While there may be optimism, India's past record does not show it has a genuine desire for peace.

Even before the Pulwama attack, when Prime Minister Imran Khan invited an Indian delegation to the Kartarpur groundbreaking ceremony, Ms Swaraj was conspicuous by her absence; she also announced India's boycott of the Saarc summit in Pakistan.

In fact, since the PTI has assumed power, Prime Minister Imran Khan has reiterated his commitment to dialogue with India several times, appealing to Mr Modi to give peace a chance — invitations which have repeatedly been spurned.

Despite the string of hostile snubs from the Indian government, Pakistan has shown restraint and pragmatism — a message underscored on Wednesday by Mr Qureshi in Bishkek, where he put the dialogue offer back on the table.

It is too soon to say whether or not Mr Khan was correct in predicting that a right-wing government in India would be better for peace talks.

Much would depend on a change in attitude on the part of India, whose hawkish behaviour has been the main obstruction in the quest for peace.

The optimism might not be altogether misplaced but it must be followed by a sincere policy shift.

India's failure to ensure this will sound the death knell for regional peace.

## **Deradicalising youth**

THE case of Naureen Leghari, a former medical student who was radicalised on the internet by the militant Islamic State group in 2017, has re-emerged following news that another university has recently revoked

her provisional admission after the administration became aware of her prior history.

Though she had undergone a deradicalisation programme under the supervision of law-enforcement agencies, little is known of this process.

While it would be extremely unfortunate and counterproductive if individuals who have been genuinely accountable for their actions and have repudiated extremist views were denied a second chance, the absence of public transparency regarding Ms Leghari's reintegration into society makes it difficult to assess whether the university had legitimate concerns regarding her presence on campus.

Indeed, Pakistan has experimented with such programmes (most notably the army-led effort with militants in Swat) with reportedly mixed results.

Now, even with the government renewing efforts to crack down on proscribed outfits, this remains a sticking point: what are the specific plans and strategies regarding the deradicalisation and mainstreaming process?

Are there clear metrics for sorting out low-level cadres from ideological masterminds, collaborators from combatants, and defining what interventions would apply accordingly?

What kind of probationary or counsellor follow-up, or other mitigating steps, are there to prevent relapses among deprogrammed 'graduates'?

And what should public or private institutions' response be to such individuals when these details are not known to them?

As cases of former university students and graduates like Ms Leghari and Saad Aziz demonstrate, radicalisation is far more nebulous than simply ascribing it to poverty and illiteracy alone.

University campuses and online spaces alike have emerged as fertile grounds for recruiting and exploiting impressionable, disaffected young minds.

Yet though political rhetoric (particularly in the aftermath of the APS attack in Peshawar), has always pointed to a holistic, intra-institutional counter-extremism response, the reality has been almost entirely security-centric.

Therein lies a significant gap in the country's non-kinetic approaches so far — the lack of a broad-spectrum treatment to target violent extremism at the roots and nip it in the bud.

While there must be a clear path for wayward young adults to find their way back into the mainstream and away from the purveyors of hate, this process must be fully known and owned by all stakeholders.

Moreover, it is absolutely essential — and well past time — to not only address but also prevent radicalisation through the development of national counter-narratives.

## **Obstetric fistula**

YESTERDAY marked the International Day to End Obstetric Fistula. Affecting mothers in large parts of the developing world, the medical condition is yet another byproduct of poverty and the marginalisation and lesser status of women in society. The consequences of the condition are not just physical, but also psychological, with many women facing social isolation and depression as a result. Often, women are unable or afraid of giving birth again after they have been afflicted with the condition. A lack of access to quality healthcare, safe maternal and prenatal services; an insufficient diet and malnutrition; and early marriages and childbirth all result in many women in Pakistan suffering from the condition, particularly in the rural parts of the country, where state-run hospitals are few and far in between and the option for C-sections out of the question. Many women end up giving birth inside their homes, without medical assistance or the presence of skilled health personnel. And yet, such topics are rarely spoken about, despite the risk of complications being relatively high. Women's health issues continue to be stigmatised and silenced, advertently or inadvertently, due to a culture of shame surrounding their bodies and bodily functions, or a lack of understanding or outright dismissal of their suffering. It is depressing that in this day and age, giving birth is still one of the most dangerous experiences women from underprivileged backgrounds face.

In addition, Pakistan continues to have one of the highest maternal mortality rates in South Asia. Out of every 100,000 live births, 178 result in

death. These ground realities only further underscore the importance of Lady Health Workers in providing basic healthcare and assistance to millions of women in the country. There is still a need for greater awareness regarding women's health, which is very much a human rights issue.

## **Development priorities**

THE room in which to carry out large-scale development activities is undoubtedly shrinking, going by the massive reductions in the development budget that we have seen this fiscal year, and the continuing cuts that have been programmed for the next. Partially as a consequence of this, the growth rate for this year is set to come in far below the target, while for the next year, the government is aiming at 4pc. These are times of macroeconomic adjustment after all, and the old formula of kick-starting growth through low interest rates and large public spending is not an option. Instead, we have the other old formula, of balancing the deficits through large-scale development budget cuts. In the meantime, we wait eagerly to see what will be different in the budget due on June 11.

The spending priorities that one can discern in the details of next year's Public Sector Development Programme that has just been approved by the government seem more or less the same as they were in previous development programmes. The largest chunk of Rs371bn out of the federal PSDP will be taken up by what they call the 'infrastructure sector', which includes power and road projects, as well as some railway and water allocations. There is a Rs21bn allocation for housing, which may relate to the prime minister's low-cost housing initiative. Apart from this, only Rs200bn is left since the total PSDP has been cut to Rs575bn after the deduction of Rs100bn worth of block grants for the prime minister's special schemes. Almost two-thirds of these block allocations are to go towards 'security enhancement' and the resettlement of displaced people, an allocation that has been reduced from its levels in the past few years. After another Rs22bn for the merger of the tribal districts, around Rs10bn is left which is taken up by the Prime Minister's Youth Skill Development Programme, something that is also very clearly a carryover from the years past.

In all, one has to strain hard to try and find anything new or different in the PSDP that would imply that things have changed drastically in Islamabad. The new government, despite its claims of being a revolutionary new enterprise, is constrained by its resource envelope. It is constrained by the burden of the past; many projects need funding to be brought to completion. It is constrained by politics, where the competing push and pull of the system demands resources to be balanced out. Meanwhile, the prime minister requires his own resource endowment apparently to keep himself in the spotlight when federal resources are doled out. In general terms, the year taking shape looks like any other year of living frugally.

## **Taking over hospitals**

THE government in Sindh has another battle on its hands. The centre has notified its takeover of three major hospitals in Karachi, while reminding all that the handover was necessitated by a Supreme Court judgement. Be that as it may, the move can hardly conceal the tensions that exist between the PPP dispensation in Sindh and those its leaders accuse of undermining their right to rule in utter disregard of the basic concepts of provincial autonomy. The hospitals in question — Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases, and the National Institute of Child Health — happen to be perhaps the busiest healthcare units in Karachi. In recent times, and under the provincial administration, many aspects of these hospitals have improved. On the other hand, the government of Sindh has been frequently taken to task over its inability to generally and comprehensively improve the health sector in the province in aid of the suffering masses. This fact may have made it easier for many to look approvingly at the transfer of these three prominent institutions from Sindh — which had been empowered to run them after the passage of the 18th Amendment — back to the federal government. But other impressions have been formed as well as the PPP politicians led by Mr Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari speak out in frustration against what they term as discrimination and contempt of the law.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari called the centre's move "an attack on hard-earned provincial autonomy". Most significantly, he pointed out that it was an arrogant action by the federal government as a review petition against the

Supreme Court order pertaining to the transfer of these hospitals was still pending. The warning that resistance to the handover would grow may be a serious one but will not necessarily make an impact on the authorities in Islamabad. If anything, the signs are that the engines for 'change' are being revved up as the pressure on the PTI government to deliver on its promises grows. At a time when the opposition is threatening the government with agitation, why would the PTI want to be seen as pressing on sternly with 'pending' tasks, such as the takeover of hospitals? This could well lead to a confrontation. Those who are aware of the price we may all end up paying are hoping that good sense and greater clarity over the issue of provincial autonomy will prevail without a showdown.

## **Journalist released**

NEWS of a court's order to release Egyptian journalist Mahmoud Hussein will come as a relief to many. His family, friends, and his colleagues at Al Jazeera have been campaigning for his freedom for years. Since his arrest in 2016, when he was picked up at the Cairo airport, the Doha-based news network has stood steadfast behind their colleague. No official charges had been levelled against him, but authorities accused him of "incitement against state institutions and broadcasting false news with the aim of spreading chaos" — an allegation refuted and condemned by his organisation. Mr Hussein spend 881 days behind prison bars without a trial. According to human rights activists, there are approximately 20,000 people languishing without trial in prisons across the country for politically motivated reasons, and the Committee to Protect Journalists once labelled Egypt "one of the world's biggest prisons for journalists". After the Arab Spring blossomed in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa, and protesters who took to the streets to topple dictatorships spoke of greater freedoms, democracy and equality, few would have expected even more repressive regimes to occupy the power vacuums left behind. Bloggers and social media users played a big role in the ouster of the Mubarak regime, but the present Egyptian parliament has approved three controversial media regulation laws to closely monitor social media activity, which journalists and human rights bodies have decried as further press curtailment.

Many journalists operate in an environment of great fear and censorship, and anything that does not fit the official state narrative — or goes against the interests of other, dangerous, groups — is punished. According to the IPI, a global network of media personnel, almost 60 journalists have been killed across the world since last May. Many are behind bars. While Egypt has been ranked as one of the worst countries for journalists, the repression, suspicion and scapegoating of the press can be seen in many parts of the world, with organised smear campaigns orchestrated or outright force employed to delegitimise critical voices.

## **Pakistan's position in US-Iran tensions**

AS the threat of a catastrophic conflict between the US and Iran looms large over the region, the government appears to be making a considerable diplomatic effort to defuse simmering tensions between the two countries.

On Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif concluded his two-day trip here with an encouraging message from Pakistan's civil and military leadership — that maximum restraint must be exercised in the prevailing situation as conflict in an already volatile region would be a threat to global peace and stability. Mr Zarif expressed his satisfaction with Pakistan's view that US pressure on Iran was unjustified, while Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi emphasised the need for a resolution of the crisis through dialogue.

It is evident from Mr Zarif's comments as well as Prime Minister Imran Khan's earlier visit to Tehran that the PTI government is making an effort to avoid taking sides.

It is by no means an easy situation, given Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE — both of whom have been generous in extending monetary support to this government — as well as the US, which can make things difficult by exerting diplomatic and political pressure.

In 2015, parliament's decision against sending troops to support the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen was a brave step but the current scenario could test the limits of that position.



Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia runs deep. The countries also enjoy strategic and defence cooperation, so — if the warm reception and vows of solidarity during the Saudi crown prince's February visit are anything to go by — it will not be easy to stay neutral in the face of a request for support from Riyadh.

In this situation, the guiding principle should be that it is in Islamabad's best interest to resist pressure.

As it successfully did during the Iran-Iraq war and the ongoing Yemen conflict, Pakistan must remain steadfast in protecting its own interests while also urging a resolution of the crisis.

For instance, Islamabad should use whatever little influence it has to persuade Iran to demonstrate that it is not directly involved in the Yemeni conflict. Or, if the OIC countries push for a strong anti-Iran stance, Pakistan must articulate its position in a way that is not offensive — while pointing out that the ultimate beneficiary of a war would be Israel. It should also be seen to be making an effort to resist conflict. A diplomatic approach would involve a proactive move to counsel its warring allies and make note of positive statements coming from Washington or Tehran.

With a large Shia population of its own and strained relations with India and Afghanistan, Pakistan cannot afford another war in the region. The government should continue to call for restraint, as a US-Iran conflict could plunge this country's security environment into jeopardy.

## **The Indian mandate**

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's second consecutive victory has sent his opponents scurrying for explanations. What spurred Mr Modi to take the BJP single-handedly past the 300-seat mark? A fractious opposition more than an overplayed militarist hand is the likely truth. For the record, Mr Modi's best show fell still short of Rajiv Gandhi's feat of 400-plus following his mother's assassination. Gandhi's own tragic death though could not deliver a simple majority to the Congress in 1991, which allegedly stole and bribed MPs to complete an eventful five-year term. Manmohan Singh received two consecutive mandates without Mr Modi's fuss. Indira Gandhi

won as resoundingly as she lost and won again. From his unprecedented majority in the 545-seat Lok Sabha, Rajiv Gandhi lost the next elections.

What is Mr Modi's mandate and how would he interpret it? There are worries about the election of Sadhvi Pargya, an accused in a terror plot but out on bail. Having lauded Mahatma Gandhi's killer, it is evident, that she would be Mr Modi's headache, and not the opposition's. Will he tinker with the constitution as some fear? It would be difficult since the BJP leans on ideologically varied allies in the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house. The prime minister has spoken of an inclusive government but will Muslims and Christians continue to be targeted in his second innings? It is more likely that his real fight would deepen with the left and progressive corpus of Indian polity. In his own words, one of his objectives in 2014 was to see a Congress-free India. Did he seek a Muslim-free India? But the Congress though considerably mauled is still there after winning a clutch of state assemblies from the BJP recently. It also shores up a crucial but fragile alliance in Karnataka while running stable governments in key Hindi-belt states. On Thursday, the party swept the polls in communist-ruled Kerala. Some would say Mr Modi is primarily the preferred candidate of a powerful business lobby, which would nudge him towards balancing his ideological yearning for a Hindu nation with the more worldly need to create a conducive climate to improve India's flagging economic profile. Currently, external circumstances, ranging from the US-Iran crisis to the US-China business stand-off and their impact on India will be his primary concern. It is hoped that normalising ties with Pakistan is part of the manoeuvre, transmitting less dire reverberations on both sides of the LoC.

## **Cricket World Cup**

THRILLING contests, big stakes, high emotions — cricket's showpiece event, the World Cup, is coming up. The euphoria around the 12th edition of this mega event is no different from past World Cups. The top 10 teams of the cricketing world clash to prove their supremacy in the four-yearly event. The 45-day extravaganza will burst into action on May 30 in England where the inaugural edition was held in 1975. The hosts last staged the mega event in 1999 and now eye the elusive title once again after being tipped as favourites. Australia, India and New Zealand are the

other front-runners for the title. However, with younger teams such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Ireland making notable strides over the past decade, no team can really claim to be clear favourites in the contest. The 2019 World Cup, besides being a lot bigger in terms of money and viewership, will also be tougher as the competition returns to its 1992 format where each team has to play the other nine to emerge a champion. However, the format provides the competing teams a greater chance of redemption which is essential in any sport.

Pakistan, the winners of the 1992 World Cup, will surely take solace in the format given their woeful preparation campaign for the extravaganza. The five successive defeats — four against England and a stunning one against Afghanistan at Bristol on Friday — coupled with fitness problems have left the team demoralised. All hopes rest on the element of surprise which we have seen in the mercurial nature of Team Pakistan in which they have stunned the best in a superlative display one day while succumbing to a minnow the next. It is for this reason alone that they are dubbed as the most predictably unpredictable side in world cricket. The question, though, is whether this Pakistan team can turn the tide — like they did at the Champions Trophy in England two years ago — or will it bow out unceremoniously to take an early flight home?

## **Reducing circular debt**

THE recent claims made by the energy minister, Omar Ayub, regarding the reductions made in the circular debt, need to be examined more closely before they can be taken seriously.

The data he shared with reporters follows earlier claims made in March, in which similar reductions in the debt, and improvements in recoveries, were touted.

His claim that the government would bring the circular debt down to zero by December 2020 is laudable on the surface, but a lot depends on how this will be done, if at all.

At the moment, all we have to go by are the claims made by the minister, with no independent corroboration.

Mr Ayub claimed that the fresh accumulation of the circular debt would be brought down from Rs38bn per month to Rs26bn by June of 2019.

He says this has been achieved on the back of a strong enforcement effort against power thieves as well as their collaborators within the power companies, and they see enough potential in this drive to bring the rate of accumulation down to zero by next year.

Something similar had happened back in 2014 when the rate of accumulation of the circular debt was brought down to zero through ramped-up enforcement and tighter supervision of billing and recoveries.

Alas, that moment did not last long since it was dependent on a few individuals in the power bureaucracy who were taking strong ownership of the effort.

The accumulation started again once those individuals were transferred out. One lesson from that exercise was that without deeper reforms in power-sector governance, lasting improvements in billing and recoveries would remain elusive.

The intention of the government to break the large power distribution companies into smaller ones, starting with the four big ones in KP and Balochistan provinces, and Multan and Lahore, may help lift efficiency.

But the real need of the hour is pricing reform where market forces need to be allowed to play a larger role in power pricing.

This is essential for getting renewable energy off the ground, especially through rooftop solar generation. Perhaps the minister can work on a larger plan on how the power sector should be reorganised for this purpose too.

Mr Ayub's claims are a reminder of the urgent need for greater transparency in power-sector governance.

Financial and operational data is kept hidden from the public and released at a time, and in a form, that serves the interests of those in power.

Unlike other areas of the economy, such as trade or fiscal operations, the power sector is under no obligation whatsoever to release any data as per a set cycle.

Changing this should be the cornerstone of any reform effort. With regular data releases, the successes and failures of any minister will be self-evident.

## **The NAB controversy**

THERE is seemingly no end to the questions surrounding the alleged conduct of NAB chief retired Justice Javed Iqbal. First, there was a controversial newspaper interview of Justice Iqbal. This was followed by video and audio recordings which allegedly have him talking intimately to a woman — the wife of someone facing a NAB probe, we are told. It is contended that the footage was originally released by a television channel close to those at the top of government, strengthening the impression that the ruling politicians may be fed up with the style and pace of the accountability bureau's chairman. But as the list of those who are suspected of being behind the leak quickly expands, what we have is a lot of commotion — and little in terms of clarity. The sheer confusion over the NAB chief's alleged actions in this case is best reflected in the statements of the country's two biggest opposition parties. Just recently, the PPP appeared to be aiming at making life difficult for Justice Iqbal. Now, with rumours that elements in the government may be after him, the PPP has taken itself into a corner. The PML-N, which was in a way echoing some of the PPP's thoughts on big issues in recent times, agreed with the latter that there was a personal motive involved. The PML-N was unable to stop one of its own Punjab MPAs, generally known for his measured reactions, from calling for the NAB chief to resign. In fact, it dissociated itself from his statement.

If the idea behind the leaks was to show the gaps and uncertainty in the ranks of an opposition that claims to be considering a joint street protest after Eid, that purpose has been served to a large extent. As far as other alleged motives are concerned, this episode could be taken to a new level where it would be very difficult, indeed impossible, for the NAB chief to survive. But even with all these theories, it is still not too late to apply logic and probe the matter — in the interests of transparency, in the name of accountability and, above all, for the sake of justice. The argument that this is a personal matter does not hold and there are sufficient grounds for

conducting an inquiry based on the events — just as the allegation that someone caught in the accountability net is being exploited by the authorities is worthy of a credible investigation.

## **Rabies on the rise**

DEATHS caused by rabies are rising in Pakistan, warn healthcare professionals, due to a chronic shortage of medicines used for its treatment. Rabies is a virus that is transmitted to humans via bites primarily by infected dogs — if not given timely treatment, death is inevitable. Yet there is no national stock of the post-exposure vaccine, with just a few hospitals procuring the imported vaccine from local vendors, whose stocks have dwindled in recent months. One reason why this issue remains ignored by public officials is the fact that it predominantly affects the poor — dog colonies thrive around garbage sites in densely populated areas, and a rabid dog is more likely to come into contact with a pedestrian than someone in a car. And so it is that so many who are bitten by rabid dogs are forced to die in agony — deaths that are easily preventable.

The issue of rabies, however, is not simply limited to ensuring timely access to these life-saving drugs. Effective rabies control requires a coherent policy that addresses several concomitant public health issues — inadequate sanitation and solid waste management, and burgeoning stray dog populations. Whereas the current ad hoc practice of culling dogs by poisoning or shooting is not only cruel but also ineffective, other countries have found success in adopting a strategy of trapping, vaccinating and sterilising stray dogs, before returning them to their colonies. This effectively reduces dog populations over time to manageable levels, while preventing the transmission of the rabies virus. Indeed, studies have found that vaccinating even a small portion of feral canines significantly reduces the percentage of human deaths from rabies. One pilot project recently implemented in a locality in Karachi, for example, showed promising results; within a year, in an area where dog-bite incidents were quite common, there were no incidents of rabies, fewer newborn puppies, and a community no longer living in fear of another outbreak. It is time the authorities, from the municipal to the federal level, took note.

## Ambitious revenue target

THE new finance team led by Abdul Hafeez Shaikh has set for itself the highest increase in the revenue target in well over a decade and one is hard-pressed to figure out whether to congratulate them for their ambition or duck for cover from the implications of what is to come. At a full-court press conference, held on Saturday, the prime minister's adviser on finance was flanked by a large team consisting of everyone from the FBR chairman to the power minister, and spoke for almost an hour trying to address concerns and engage in some early public messaging on what is to come in the next few months. At the heart of this whole event was the Rs5.55tr revenue target that he said would be given to the FBR in the forthcoming budget, which represents a nearly 35pc increase in revenue collection from the current year. It is hard to recall the last time the FBR was asked to mount a revenue effort of this magnitude. Does this mean a tsunami of taxes is about to come down upon us?

Mr Shaikh seems to think this can be done without increasing the burden on those who are already paying their taxes as per the rules. He cited data which shows that the number of utility connections under industrial category is in the hundreds of thousands, whereas there are only slightly more than 40,000 industrial taxpayers registered with the FBR. The story is the same if one looks at the number of companies registered with the SECP, which is also far larger than those registered with the tax authorities. According to the adviser, who seems to be taking his lead on the matter from the FBR chairman, these are the directions in which his government will work to climb towards their revenue target for the next year.

There are grounds for scepticism though. This is not the first time we have heard of using data innovatively to triangulate consumption patterns and identify potential new taxpayers. Such efforts have been mounted several times in the past as well, and they should continue in the future too. The question is whether such exercises can yield the revenues that the government is looking for in a single year. Those outside the net are no fools. In the past, they have shown tremendous resilience and ingenuity of their own to thwart such moves. Roping them in is a long-term objective, but if the government is presenting this sort of work as a core part of their

revenue plan for next year, it means one should brace for all sorts of resort to quick fixes and tax hikes on fuel and power, among other things. Mr Shaikh should do more to prepare the public for what seems like an ambitious revenue plan coming up.

## **HIV crisis**

ALMOST 21,500 people have been screened for HIV/AIDS in Ratodero subdivision in Sindh since the outbreak of the infection was first reported last month. A shocking 681 of them have tested positive for HIV. Even more shocking, 537 of the latest HIV cases are children between the ages of two and 15, while a few others are even younger. Naturally, the largely poor residents of the area are living in a state of fear. In one video being shared on social media, a man says he has stopped visiting barbers to get shaved or taking his children for haircuts. As we await the 10-member international rapid response team from the WHO and Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to arrive in the country in order to determine the source of the outbreak, the government believes most of these cases are the result of medical malpractice — the reuse of infected syringes and unscreened blood transfusion — while some are the result of unsafe sexual practices. Meanwhile, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari paid a visit to the region to personally inquire into the matter, flanked by other party delegates. He tried to clarify some of the misconceptions surrounding HIV as he explained that HIV is a treatable illness (though there is no cure). Before departing, he promised to set up an endowment fund to ensure lifelong and free-of-cost treatment to those infected by the disease in Sindh, while hinting at a new bill to tackle the issue.

All that is well and good — though it remains to be seen if Mr Bhutto-Zardari lives up to his promise — but no matter how many new laws are inaugurated, until there is strong implementation, not much will change on



the ground. For many, the panic created around HIV in Larkana has pointed to large-scale, structural ills in Sindh's healthcare. For instance, according to a report published in this paper a few days ago, the doctor who is suspected for spreading the illness due to criminal malpractice is reported by some residents to have been the only paediatrician in Ratodero and surrounding areas. Until these structural issues are addressed, and until politicians stop blaming one another instead of taking action on the issue, events such as these are bound to recur.

## Moon matters

THE Ministry for Science and Technology has inaugurated Pakistan's first official moon-sighting website and Hijri calendar. One immediate outcome of this is that we already 'know' that the country will be celebrating Eid-ul-Fitr on June 5 this year. The traditional practice is that we wait for the Ruet-i-Hilal Committee on Ramazan 29 to determine whether or not we will be celebrating Eid the next day — even if, in recent times, science-based departments have accurately predicted the emergence of the elusive line of silver on the horizon. The difference this time is that we have a minister for science and technology who is very eager to convince everyone that, with science spelling it out so clearly, there is no need for the country to continue with the usual gathering of religious scholars for the purpose of sighting the moon. If this is a sensitive debate requiring honest and earnest participation by scientists and religious scholars alike, the government seems to have made up its mind. It is going ahead with simplifying a matter it says many other countries had resolved — on the basis of science — a long time ago. This is borne out by the fact that along with the website, the ministry has also announced the creation of an app to facilitate the general public in keeping track of the moon.

The controversy indicates just how difficult it may be to pursue certain scientific causes in the country. About moon-sighting, many religious scholars insist on the submission and acceptance of evidence from witnesses as a religious prerequisite. In the wake of the latest push for finding an answer to this long-lingering and divisive problem, there are suggestions that call for science and religion to combine in the matter.

Perhaps this could take the form of an arrangement where religious scholars can continue with the moon-sighting committee and are given the right to announce the date for Eid, but must treat the word of scientists as irrefutable evidence.

## **Improving access to justice**

IN a move that marks a first for Pakistan's judicial system, the Supreme Court on Monday heard four cases through the newly established e-court.

Litigants and their respective lawyers from Karachi 'appeared' before an apex court bench via two large LED screens that had been set up in the courtroom.

The maiden electronic proceedings took place apparently without any technological glitch as the voices of both the senior counsel and president of the Supreme Court Bar Association at the Karachi registry were audible.

On the occasion of what was truly a historic moment, Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa — the architect of this step — hailed it as a milestone.

"Through the e-court system, we have saved between Rs2m and Rs2.5m in one day alone that otherwise had to be borne by the litigants," the chief justice said, as he acknowledged a potential remedy to a long-standing problem faced by litigants across the judicial hierarchy.

The electronic court system was first discussed by Justice Khosa during the full-court reference hosted in honour of former chief justice Saqib Nisar earlier this year.

In his speech, Justice Khosa had expressed a commitment to addressing the causes of delays in the disposition of cases at all levels.

“I would also like to build some dams, a dam against undue and unnecessary delays in the judicial determination of cases, a dam against frivolous litigation,” he had said.

This week’s technological advancement should hopefully improve access to justice in the country, especially once the teething problems have been taken care of.

That Pakistan’s judicial system is in dire need of reform is no secret.

High legal costs, unending delays, adjournments, pending cases, never-ending trials — all these factors contribute to the gaps in quick and affordable justice.

Eventually, as a result of these delays and expenses, it is the poor who suffer the most; they are then left to seek relief from informal systems.

The idea behind an innovation of this nature is to reduce inconvenience and diminish delays for all parties.

In the same spirit, the judiciary must continue its efforts to improve both access to and the quality of justice for the average citizen.

The issues of lack of judges, scores of undertrial prisoners in overcrowded jails, insufficient infrastructure such as vans for the transport of prisoners, frequent adjournments, etc must all be addressed.

The judges’ workload, too, should be eased through discouraging frivolous litigation and appeals.

Firming up the judicial process and revamping the criminal justice system would also discourage parallel legal forums such as jirgas and weaken the argument for the existence of military courts.

It is crucial to reform the justice system to empower citizens and earn their trust.

Without it, the authority of the rule of law risks being undermined.

## Defusing tensions

DAYS after the alarming incident between the army and Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement protesters at a security check post in North Waziristan, the persisting lack of clarity surrounding the episode remains deeply troubling. Though it is uncertain how the clash was initiated, two aspects are clear. First, the protesters were raising provocative slogans around soldiers guarding their post in a sensitive area. The PTM's leadership must be mindful of this singular aspect of their style of protest that many had warned would be counterproductive to their cause. Second, the fact that several soldiers also received injuries points to armed individuals being present at the scene. This is a departure for the PTM, which had maintained a non-violent stance for well over a year. It would be an unfortunate though not implausible development, given the risks of even the most peaceful of movements resorting to violent means in the face of repeated, heavy-handed use of force to quell them. As leaders of the opposition parties in parliament and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan have pointed out, denying the PTM its right to peaceful protest and arresting its activists en masse is ultimately detrimental to the state and its citizens. Indeed, this country needs no reminder of the potential for catastrophic consequences when citizens making rights-based demands are summarily dismissed instead of engaged with.

But all is not lost, provided that recalcitrance is set aside, and courage and clarity of purpose guide the way. Two immediate actions are required to defuse tensions and prevent further escalation. First, it is essential to dispel intensifying mistrust on all sides by constituting a parliamentary fact-finding body to get to the truth of what transpired on Sunday. Moreover, the authorities and the PTM must immediately come to the table to reiterate their common goals of lasting peace and rule of law, and use that as the basis on which to conduct honest, productive talks. For any lasting resolution, it must be acknowledged that an entire generation has grown up in the historically disenfranchised region of erstwhile Fata against a backdrop of seemingly unending conflict. The grievances of these disaffected tribal youth — who have experienced more than their fair share of death, displacement and despair — require a politically brokered solution. Pakistan needs a long-term, multi-stakeholder process to address

the issues that the PTM — and, indeed, human rights groups — have long been raising.

## **New shipyard**

THE need for another shipyard in Pakistan has been highlighted at a recent Senate hearing, where the Committee on Defence Production was told that the country's shipbuilding needs have grown beyond the ability of its lone shipyard to support. A proposal exists to build a shipyard in Gwadar, which would require 750 acres of land with a coastline of 4 km. The committee learned that Rs200m have already been released for the project which is barely a year old. Land acquisition has been carried out near Sur Nullah in the area, and given continued government support, the shipyard can possibly emerge as one of the pioneer industries in the area for which it is earmarked.

As work progresses, it is also worthwhile to examine why the local industry prefers to buy its ships from abroad rather than the indigenous shipyard. The managing director of the Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works has put his unhappiness with this on record in the past. Perhaps greater incentives can be offered to buyers to opt for local ships, but at the same time, a greater market orientation could also be of benefit to the KS&EW. The managing director has rightly given the example of India that has far more shipyards than Pakistan, but it is also worth pointing out that a large number of them are in the private sector across the border. They benefit from a government-sponsored subsidy programme under the 'make in India' initiative launched a few years ago, but other than that, they respond largely to market signals rather than government control. There are some arguments to be made for continuing with public-sector investment in the shipbuilding industry, especially given the large infrastructure costs it entails and the small size of the local market. But greater attention to the requirements of the local market will help the KS&EW build its case for this investment at a time when the government has to carefully consider its priorities given budgetary constraints.

## Hopes for peace in Afghanistan

THE path of peace in Afghanistan continues to test the patience of all those involved in the task of bringing security to the war-torn country. While there is a genuine effort in this direction, there are far too many pieces to put in place. Talks have continued in Moscow this week, as a parallel to Doha, where the US emissary Zalmay Khalilzad has the delicate job of reconciling divergent views. The 14-member Afghan Taliban delegation in Moscow has reiterated its demand for the withdrawal of international forces as a prerequisite for “peace to be agreed”. It is a complex picture. Even with the US now eager to end its longest war and exit the country, there are fears that the objective might not be achieved in a manner that results in stability across Afghanistan. The Taliban’s aversion to talks with the Ashraf Ghani government has also created hurdles, with unconfirmed reports that Taliban leaders refused to have separate meetings with Kabul’s representatives, though the head of the High Peace Council, Mohammad Karim Khalili, reportedly participated in the talks and duly drew attention to the urgent need to end the violence in Afghanistan. The Moscow meeting is the second one to be held in the Russian capital since February.

Unfortunately, the incessant violence — including a string of attacks on security targets in Afghanistan on the eve of the Moscow talks — have cast a long shadow over the peace effort. International peace-brokers must not allow efforts to flag, and all avenues — whether it is the Khalilzad initiative, or the Moscow dialogue channel, or indeed, Pakistan’s persuasion, must be pursued, especially when other violent groups, such as the IS, are making their presence felt in Afghanistan. The role of big powers such as Russia and China is also crucial to encouraging more comprehensive deliberations and bringing all nuances of the Afghan question into sharp focus. A major issue is the general discomfort at the idea of a Taliban government at the centre enjoying unbridled powers, especially given past experience. Reconciling warring Afghan sides would mean removing mistrust by giving guarantees.

But who can give whom what guarantees regarding Afghanistan is contentious in itself. President Ashraf Ghani’s government is not the only one in the run for the ‘the most faction-ridden’ title. The Taliban can appear

to be just as divided and the actions of various groups among them can be extremely difficult to predict. This is why so much importance is being given to the inclusion in the talks of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Released from a Pakistani jail last year, Mullah Baradar had helped Mullah Omar build up the Taliban. Given this backdrop, the veteran is in a better position than most to promise what is a big prerequisite for peace in Afghanistan: good conduct by various factions within the Taliban.

## **PSX chief resigns**

THE resignation of Richard Morin as chief executive officer of the Pakistan Stock Exchange is a moment of sober reflection for the bourse. There may well have been problems with Mr Morin's appointment, but the fact is that in the end only the broker directors voted in favour of his removal, while the foreign investors seemed satisfied with the explanations offered by him for his supposed conflict of interest in retaining his position as CEO of a wealth management fund in Canada. The vote on the board to demand the resignation was split right down the middle, but at the end of the day the brokers got their way. It is worth asking at this time why half of the members of the board seemed satisfied, because given how the voting went, it could just as easily be seen as the brokers ganging up to oust someone they consider to be an outsider in their club.

Perhaps the event highlights the importance of carrying the capital market reforms agenda further still. The whole idea of this long-drawn-out battle was to diminish the power of the brokers on the bourse, which serves as a front-line regulator to check their behaviour as well. In times when the stock market is booming, the brokers are able to cut all sorts of compromises to get along with the regulator. The relationship is tested in times when the rallies breaks and the market falls. Sadly, this is what has happened since the arrival of Mr Morin as CEO of the stock exchange back in January 2018. The continuous declines that the market had been seeing since then gathered pace, bringing the situation to the point where the brokers today are asking the government to come in with a support fund much like what happened in 2008. It is hard to miss this as the backdrop to Mr Morin's departure, or how the brokers were able to come

together against him. Having got their way, the brokers have now set their own standards too. Conflict of interest must not be tolerated in the stock-trading business, and this applies to the pattern of trades carried out by large brokers as well as the research their houses put out. The regulators should now keep a doubly vigilant eye on the broker community to ensure they live up to their own standards.

## **Railway vacancies**

IT was in November last year that Minister for Railways Sheikh Rashid Ahmad announced the process of hiring new workers for Pakistan Railways. Some 10,000 to 11,000 'skilled workers' would be required 'on an emergency basis' to inject efficiency into the running of the public-sector giant, the minister had announced at a news conference in Lahore some months ago, having apparently received the go-ahead from the prime minister. He said all employees who were rehired on a contract basis after retirement were to be replaced by younger people. At the time, it sounded like a positive way of bringing fresh minds, ideas, and new enthusiasm into a lethargic institution that forever seems to be approaching the end of its journey. Over one million hopefuls submitted their job applications for 8,000 positions in major cities across the country, in the hopes of working for the coveted government sector in the backdrop of a dismal and uncertain economy. So how would the ministry go about selecting the best minds, the hardest workers, the most suitable candidates from the abundance of choice before it? Well, arbitrarily, it would seem. It was recently announced by the railways minister himself that candidates would be hired through a ballot — essentially, a lottery to decide who would fill which slot — in a manner that seems impersonal and random.

It is difficult to find any logic for such announcements that come across as cold-hearted and indifferent to the plight of the workers and institution. Many have expressed their shock at the announcement. Not only is the process unethical, it is unconstitutional. For a company that has been running into massive losses for years, such an attitude belies an (at best) non-serious approach to a very serious and persistent malaise. Qualified



people are required to improve the railways and help steer it in a positive direction. While the government speaks wistfully of bullet trains occasionally, it seems it cannot even choose the best and brightest to fill the vacancies in this sector.

## **Reference against judges**

IF history is any guide, recent developments pertaining to the country's superior judiciary may be inviting more trouble than is necessary.

The Supreme Judicial Council yesterday issued notices to the attorney general with regard to the references filed against Justice Qazi Faez Isa and Justice Karim Khan Agha by the government. Reportedly, a reference has been filed against another high court judge as well. That the three are sitting justices, meaning they exercise vital decision-making powers that may not be amenable to all quarters, makes the matter all the more significant.

Read: Supreme Judicial Council issues notice to Justice Qazi Faez Isa over reference

Justice Isa's identity was the first to be known through a media leak, and in a manner that raises questions about transparency and intent. It prompted the judge to write to President Arif Alvi asking for confirmation as to whether the government had taken such a step and a copy of the reference. Further, he said in his letter that, "Selective leaks amount to character assassination, jeopardise my right to due process and fair trial and undermine the institution of the judiciary".

The point is a valid one.

Such procedural violations impair the ability of a judge to discharge his or her duties effectively, because the credibility of their verdicts is greatly dependent upon unimpeachable personal conduct and the public perception of them as men and women of integrity.

Granted, there is more than one judge whose reputation and career is at stake here, but what has emerged until now — or not emerged, depending

on one's interpretation — has the potential to snowball into something much bigger.

Indeed, even what has transpired thus far has elicited strong reactions from some of the country's most senior lawyers and several politicians. Additional Attorney General Zahid F. Ebrahim has tendered his resignation, contending that the matter is not about accountability of judges but “a reckless attempt to tarnish the reputation of independent individuals and browbeat the judiciary”. The Pakistan Bar Council vice chairman too has indicated his reservations over the government's “targeting” of the judge. Few would dispute that Justice Isa has a reputation for independence and plain-speaking, most recently reflected in his scathing verdict on the Faizabad dharna that was bound to ruffle a few feathers.

More clarity about the government's move is needed to discourage conspiracy theories, but what is certain is that we cannot afford another institutional clash such as the one that triggered the lawyers' movement in 2007. For despite the eventual success of the mass protests in reclaiming the people's democratic rights and the rule of law, judicial independence in Pakistan today is under greater strain than ever before. In fact, the country stands at a particularly critical juncture; society — including the ruling classes — is deeply polarised, with a markedly reduced tolerance for dissent and for peaceful resolution of conflicts. These internal frictions make it imperative that no situation be created that could give rise to any further disaffection with the state.

## **Bailout for brokers**

THE government may be getting ready to announce an ‘austerity’ budget but it seems that there is plenty of money to spare for bailing out billionaires. The prime minister's adviser on finance had earlier approved a bailout package, euphemistically referred to as a ‘market support fund’. On Thursday, he got the Economic Coordination Committee to approve a Rs20bn sovereign guarantee to be given to the National Investment Trust, which will now use the money to invest in select stocks to help reverse the declines seen on the trade floor. The fund has been set up at the insistence of the stock market brokers, and it seems that the relevant approvals were acquired for it very quickly indeed. While it may be

heartening to see the government working so fast and coming up with the resources for an important objective it has identified, it would have been better had this objective not been to bail out billionaires.

If anybody thought that the stock market should be what its name suggests — a market — they should now be disabused of that notion. In a market, buyers and sellers meet to generate a price with the government acting only as a referee to ensure that covenants are honoured. Second, if anybody thought that a cash-strapped government, which inherited a broken economy, would carefully utilise its scarce public resources — whether fiscal or credit — and spend judiciously in the public interest, they must think again. This government wasted no time in finding billions to bail out a handful of troubled super wealthy individuals, which seems to be the main objective of this so-called stock market support fund. Such actions contradict the government's claims of taking austerity measures and make it difficult for the public to entertain any entreaties for austerity. Every call for sacrifice that is made to the general population will beg a simple question in return: why weren't the wealthy asked to sacrifice first? The government's move sends out the wrong message to those people who pay their taxes; besides it is certainly not the best way of utilising the country's scarce savings. In these times of economic hardship, the finance adviser must publicly explain his decision about the fund if people are to be convinced of the effectiveness of the government's overall economic agenda. Bailing out the rich is surely not a good way to start one's tenure, especially when ordinary folk are finding it difficult to make ends meet.

## **Menace of ice**

THE recent arrests of over a dozen alleged dealers of crystal meth in Karachi should serve as a sobering eye-opener. At a news conference on Wednesday, the police disclosed that several suspects were still at large, including Karachi's biggest dealer of 'ice' (as the drug is colloquially known). Worse still is the claim that the primary clientele of this criminal gang and their life-destroying wares were college and university students. Indeed, since Pakistan's first reported discovery of a meth production lab in an upscale Karachi neighbourhood in late 2012, accounts of drug busts, overdoses and crimes all linked to crystal meth have steadily streamed in

from across the length and breadth of the country, indicating the growing prevalence of ice on our streets. Compounding the inflow of contraband past our borders through a nexus of drug smugglers and complicit officials is the relative ease with which the drug can be locally produced owing, in large part, to poor regulatory oversight of controlled substances (recall the ephedrine scandal). Yet routine drug raids by the authorities are announced almost as a matter of course, and reported in the same blasé fashion in the press unless there's some novel angle to it. Clearly, unless there is a concerted, inter-agency effort overseen by the Anti-Narcotics Force, it will be business as usual for the kingpins of this illicit trade.

The issue of rising meth usage, however, should not be viewed only through the lens of law enforcement. The fact that so many recreational drug users turn out to be barely older than children points to a deeper malaise. In a society that values conformity over individuality, groupthink over critical reasoning, it is little wonder that the youth are seduced into experimenting with drugs, be it to cope, escape or 'fit in'. While authority figures would benefit from some introspection, educational institutions and parents must also focus on imparting the necessary life skills to youth, while facilitating recreational activities and providing rehabilitative support to combat addiction.





















































