

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of January 2020*

**Note:** This is a compiled work by the Team The CSS Point. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is NOT FOR SALE. You may order this booklet and only printing and shipping cost will be incurred.

**Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)**

[www.thecsspoint.com](http://www.thecsspoint.com)



10012345678902



**BUY CSS BOOKS ONLINE**

**CASH ON DELIVERY**

**ALL OVER PAKISTAN**

**<https://cssbooks.net>**

**ALL COMPULSORY AND  
OPTIONAL SUBJECTS BOOK  
FROM SINGLE POINT**

**ORDER NOW**

**03336042057 - 0726540141**

# DOWNLOAD

**CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines**



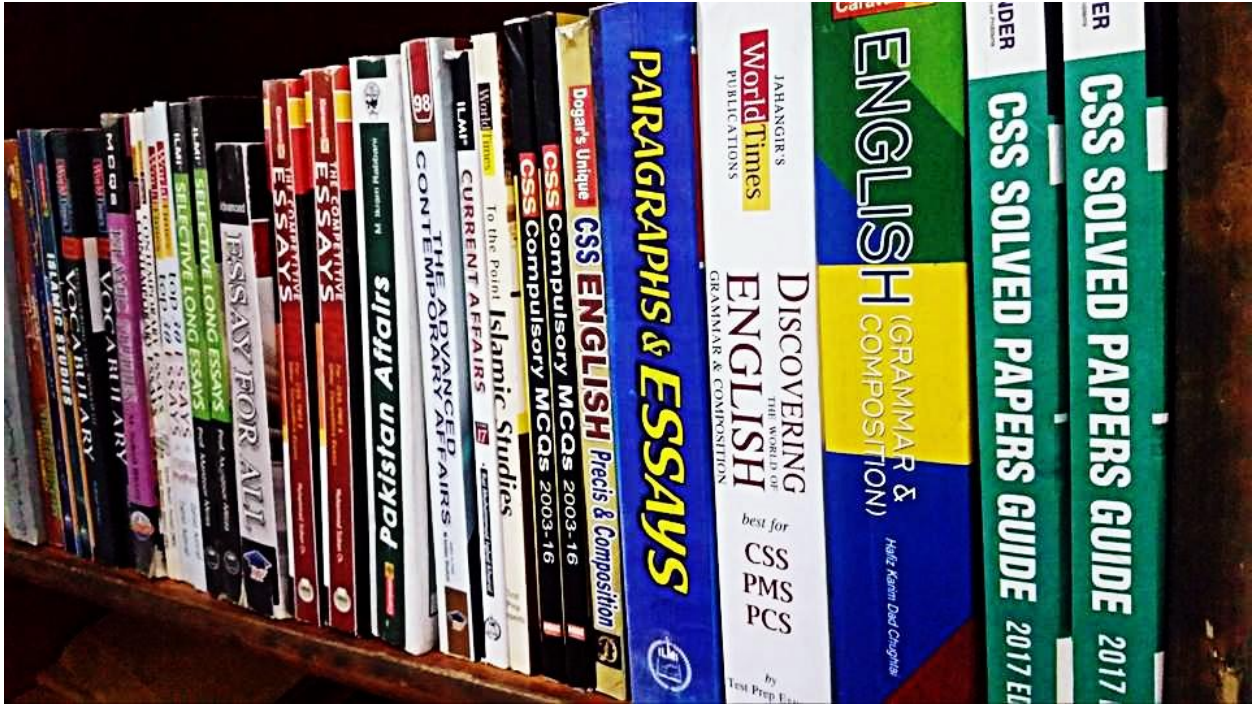
**THE CSS POINT**  
Yes We Can Do It!

**[WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM](http://WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM)**

- **Download CSS Notes**
- **Download CSS Books**
- **Download CSS Magazines**
- **Download CSS MCQs**
- **Download CSS Past Papers**

*The CSS Point, Pakistan's The Best  
Online FREE Web source for All CSS  
Aspirants.*

Email: [info@thecsspoint.com](mailto:info@thecsspoint.com)



BUY CSS / PMS / NTS & GENERAL KNOWLEDGE BOOKS  
ONLINE **CASH ON DELIVERY** ALL OVER PAKISTAN

Visit Now:

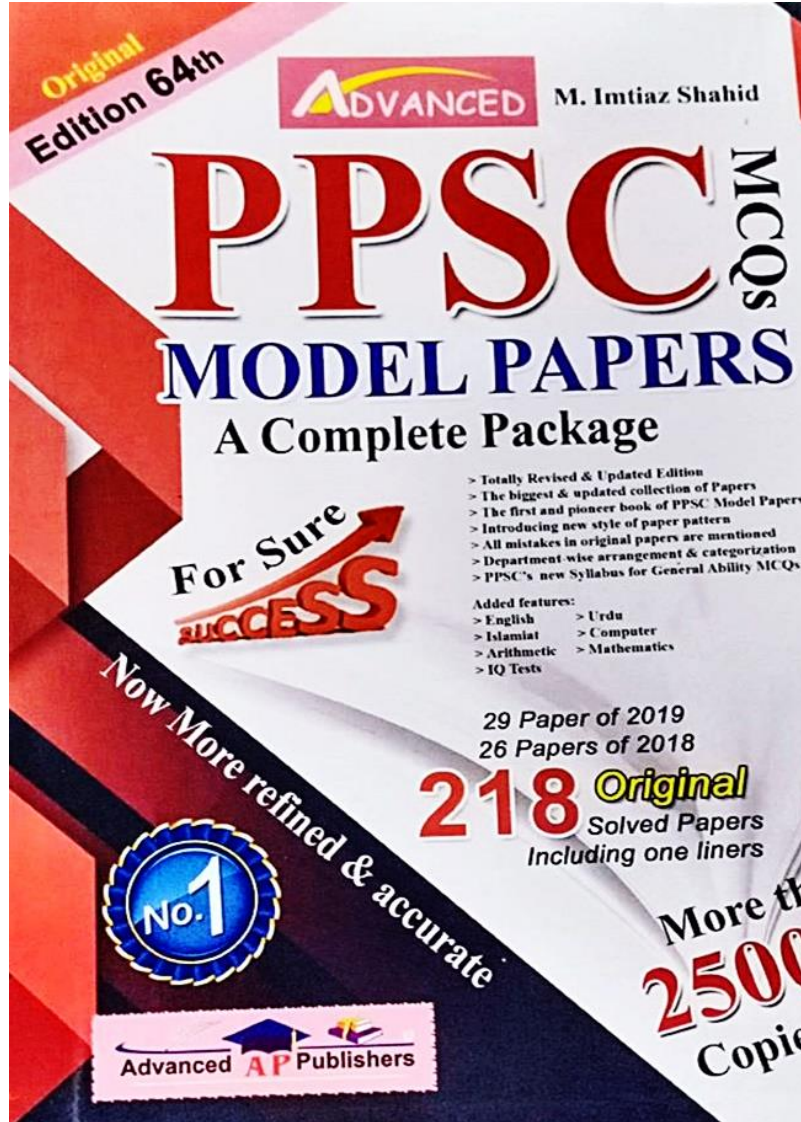
[WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET](http://WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET)

For Oder & Inquiry  
Call/SMS/WhatsApp

**0333 6042057 – 0726 540316**

# PPSC Model Papers

## 64<sup>th</sup> Edition (Latest & Updated)



By Imtiaz Shahid

Advanced Publishers





For Order Call/SMS 03336042057 ~ 0726540141

Contents

New year challenge.....	10
Facebook vs Kashmir.....	11
Welfare of trans people.....	12
Decline in terrorism.....	13
Climate 2020.....	14
Health crises.....	15
Rana Sanaullah’s demand.....	16
Revenue jitters.....	17
More threats.....	18
Soleimani’s killing.....	20
Etisalat’s offer.....	21
Missing persons’ advocate.....	22
World policeman.....	23
Patch-up in Sindh?.....	24
Soil erosion.....	25
Absentee leadership.....	26
Presidential powers.....	28
Collapsing standards.....	29
Iran nuclear deal.....	29
Violence under Modi.....	31
Antisera plant.....	32
Legislation on COAS’s tenure.....	33
SBP report.....	34
A case of exploding egos?.....	35
Iranian FM’s visa issue.....	36
SDG challenge.....	37
FATF requirements.....	38
Iran-US climbdown.....	39
Piped gas.....	40
Turtle trafficking.....	41
Acts of desperation.....	42
Traders vs FBR.....	43

Time to declare a polio emergency .....	44
Zainab Alert Bill .....	45
Quetta blast .....	46
CIJ's objections to NAB law .....	47
Punjab AIDS epidemic .....	48
Four-day Tests.....	49
Vacant CEC post .....	50
PML-N's choice.....	52
MQM convener's move .....	53
Iran plane disaster .....	54
Winter deaths .....	55
Boot theatrics.....	56
Bangladesh series.....	57
Real estate scams.....	58
Admin-police tussle.....	59
Pemra's foolish action.....	60
Water shortages.....	62
SCO invitation.....	63
Outrage in 60 seconds .....	64
Hot money .....	65
Crisis time for PTI .....	66
Pakistan Super League .....	67
US-Taliban deal .....	68
Senate furore .....	69
Harsh sentences.....	70
Wheat flour crisis .....	71
Prisoners' health .....	72
Winter sports .....	73
Pleading for revenue.....	74
Middle East tumult.....	75
Rights activist's detention.....	76
US on CPEC.....	77
ECP consensus.....	79



Film release blocked .....	80
Pakistan-India ties .....	80
Virus panic.....	82
Media in chains .....	83
Corruption index .....	84
Rohingya persecution .....	85
Costlier Haj.....	86
Knee-jerk U-turns' .....	87
UK's travel advisory.....	88
PTV licence fee .....	89
Baghdad protest.....	90
A standard curriculum .....	91
Women on wheels .....	92
Trouble in Punjab .....	93
Student unions .....	94
Media crisis .....	95
Railways in the dock.....	96
Cost of conflict .....	97
Witness protection.....	98
Monetary policy .....	99
Diplomatic dupery.....	100
Yet another crackdown .....	101
Indian bellicosity .....	102
Pemra overreach.....	103
Polio workers .....	105

## New year challenge

WITH crises-battered 2019 behind it, Pakistan enters 2020 with cautious hope, as an optimistic prime minister promises economic stability and jobs in the new year — a view hardly shared by an opposition reeling from the cases against its leaders, including a former president and prime minister.

Crises hit the nation with rapidity, engulfing every segment of state and society as inflation worsened, political polarisation sharpened and judicial pronouncements made waves. Yet what has baffled even the most ardent of the PTI chief's admirers is his inability to shed the 'container syndrome'.

He will need to; besides the economy, the biggest challenge before Prime Minister Imran Khan now is the uphill task of reviving the people's faith in his commitment to democracy, and proving by deeds that he can carry the opposition along in the task of nation-building without compromising his promise of accountability.

The aim he has set for himself and his government — to turn Pakistan into a welfare state — is laudable.

Sceptics likely to dismiss it as a political mantra devoid of substance may revise their opinion if he and the plethora of his ministers and advisers genuinely pursue this ideal in a manner that is democratic and evokes cooperation, not only from lawmakers but from a government machinery that is demoralised and lives in fear.

The prime minister can disarm his critics if he makes up his mind to uphold the supremacy of parliament, in part by attending the house during the question hour as he had earlier promised.

Negligence of this kind leads to the unfortunate scenario where the Senate, which hasn't had a session in four months, stands virtually dysfunctional.

If democracy is to flourish and civilian supremacy to reign, the leader of the house must not lend the impression that he does not care about parliament.

Vital legislative work awaits the prime minister, as the country cannot afford indefinite political gridlock or being governed by presidential decree alone. For this, he must make his political rivals discard the persecution complex.

All these tasks — and the dreams for Pakistan’s future he has often spoken of — require a robust parliament and the opposition’s willing cooperation if the prime minister is to succeed in recasting his government’s image as that of one armed to the teeth with democratic and legislative tools to plunge into the task of creating the Naya Pakistan he aspires to.

It is also through parliamentary supremacy that the civilian leadership can deftly deal with external affairs so that foreign governments know who to negotiate with, at a time when Pakistan faces serious challenges to its security on its eastern and western borders.

At the start of this new year, let us all, and not just the government, embrace the coming decade with an open mind.

## **Facebook vs Kashmir**

FACEBOOK often struggles with its principles regarding freedom of speech for users versus its bottom line, which requires keeping powerful stakeholders happy.

This appeared to be on display once again on Monday, when the company blocked live streaming of the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation’s news bulletins highlighting Indian atrocities in occupied Kashmir.

As reported by Radio Pakistan, Facebook had been sending messages since May warning the PBC of violating “community standards on dangerous individuals and organisations”.

The company’s spokesperson later clarified that the PBC’s access to Facebook Live was only temporarily restricted pending review.

Nonetheless, there is a broader pattern, since the death of Burhan Wani in 2016, of Facebook methodically censoring news and opinion on the Kashmir crisis.

Based on news reports and details shared by users, censorship activities occur in short, sharp spikes around current events connected to India. It is reasonable to assume that this policy is set in place through lobbying by India, one of Facebook’s critical markets.

The question of who is a terrorist and who is a freedom fighter; which struggle is legitimate and which is not, comes down to who has more sway with the social network, which is largely determined by size and scope of the market, not by higher principles or nuanced examination of the issue at hand.

It is true that Facebook is facing a Herculean task trying to manage the inevitable politics that result from being responsible for billions of users globally — it encounters challenges that have never been faced by any organisation historically — but it is doing a poor job of it.

This has real-world consequences, especially in conflict zones.

The likelihood that the social network will change its modus operandi is slim, and given that Twitter is going down the same path of censorship, the internet as a whole will become increasingly regulated in favour of those with the most power.

For Kashmiris and those lobbying for their rights, social media in its current form is more curse than blessing.

In such a situation, the suggestion by the prime minister's aide Firdous Ashiq Awan that Pakistan stop relying heavily on these social media platforms isn't as absurd as it sounds. The internet is still unpredictable; companies rise and fall, and if Facebook, Twitter and YouTube do not offer their users the freedom they seek, they will go elsewhere. This is a fundamental the platforms must recognise sooner rather than later.

## **Welfare of trans people**

ON Monday, Prime Minister Imran Khan distributed Sehat Insaf cards to members of the transgender community in Peshawar. He regretted the discrimination faced by the community, and reassured them of his government's protection. In previous months, the government-issued healthcare cards were extended to citizens with disabilities in Punjab and those belonging to the tribal districts in KP. By being a visible and vocal advocate at the helm of his Sehat Insaf scheme, the prime minister sends a commendably strong message to others — that the welfare of historically marginalised groups is necessary to create a more equitable and compassionate society. But our nation continues to suffer from many contradictions, including attitudes towards the trans community. For instance, in 2018, rights activists celebrated the historic passage of the

Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, which gave trans people the right to self-identify on all official documentation. The act also protects them from discrimination and guarantees them the same constitutional rights as any other citizen of the state. However, in that same year, there were many horrific instances of violence committed against the community. In KP alone, some 479 attacks were recorded and, according to advocacy group TransAction, four trans women were murdered. Until more is done to prosecute such hate crimes, all other legislative or symbolic measures will lead to little change on the ground.

Additionally, the medical community will need to sensitise its staff, and formulate policies and procedures to better attend to the healthcare needs of the transgender community, who have repeatedly expressed their discomfort at visiting clinics, as they are subject to a host of insensitive questions. Even worse, they are ignored, with instances of hospital staff refusing to attend to them in emergency situations. This has led to some members of the transgender community demanding separate wards. While this is one step, it would be better to create a more equal society, which does not need to segregate itself further in order for its marginalised members to feel protected.

## Decline in terrorism

PAKISTAN is making reassuringly steady progress out of the grip of militancy. According to the latest report on terrorism-related violence in 2019 by the Centre for Research for Security Studies, 518 people died in around 370 terrorist attacks last year.

The number of fatalities — which includes civilians, security and government personnel, and militants — is 30pc less than in 2018, when 739 lives were lost in approximately 400 attacks. The extent of improvement is even more starkly illustrated when compared with terrorism-related fatalities in 2013 that, as per the CRSS, numbered over 4,600.

Suicide attacks have similarly shown a precipitous decline, plunging from 26 in 2018 to nine last year — with 295 and 56 deaths, respectively. 2019 also marks the first year since 2004 in which no drone strike took place. Of the 141 militants arrested last year, the highest number was from the TTP (32) followed by the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (11).

The conclusion is incontrovertible: after nearly two decades of gut-wrenching violence that claimed thousands of innocent lives and left a trail of devastation in its wake, Pakistan has turned a corner. This has much to do with the kinetic operations that the security forces have undertaken in the northern areas.

Consider the rate of decline in civilian fatalities: in 2014 — the year that Zarb-i-Azb was launched — they numbered 2,590 — including the 141 who perished in the APS massacre. In 2015, by which time terrorist groups like the TTP were under pressure and many of their fighters on the run, 1,146 civilians had been slain.

However, the seeds of militancy will continue to produce their deadly harvest until each and every vestige of their existence has been rooted out. That takes patience and diligence from all segments of society. It was only last week that the Punjab CTD, after an operation in Gujranwala, claimed to have busted a media cell of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

A few months ago, the Sindh CTD announced it had busted a splinter cell of the AQIS in Karachi. According to the law-enforcement agency, the group comprised individuals who had returned from Afghanistan and were planning to carry out attacks in the city.

Earlier, on March 22, there was an assassination attempt on well-known religious scholar Maulana Taqi Usmani, in which three of his aides were killed. There are also geopolitical factors that in tandem with ideological objectives can spill over into our country, such as when Pakistan became a theatre for sectarian violence in a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the 1980s.

Presently, the never-ending strife in Afghanistan and the foothold that the militant Islamic State group has found there, particularly in provinces contiguous with Pakistan, are cause for concern. We are fighting an implacable enemy and, while the latest figures are encouraging and show that the country is headed in the right direction, complacency is not an option.

## **Climate 2020**

THE decade past had begun with predictions of an impending climate change catastrophe, and it has ended with the reality of not paying closer attention to those warnings. Apocalyptic scenarios had been imagined by evidence-backed

scientists — and not doomsday merchants — who foretold that the extreme weather patterns would only worsen in the coming years, as global temperatures kept increasing and sea levels continued to rise. Ten years ago, extreme heatwaves were documented in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Russia; a drought gripped the Amazon River basin; and heavy snowstorms swept across North America. In Pakistan, powerful floods caused by heavy rainfall led to over 2,000 deaths, while millions of others were displaced. They were forced into becoming climate change refugees, as their homes and livelihoods were swept away by the waters. Now, as we enter the new decade, rising global temperatures have broken all previous records, with many countries recording extreme weather patterns. In 2019, hurricanes struck the island of Puerto Rico; Europe suffered two deadly heatwaves; and cyclones devastated the Bahamas and Japan. Meanwhile, thousands of fires gripped the Amazon rainforest in Brazil and bordering Bolivia in August. And ferocious bush fires first sparked in November continue to rage in Australia.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that climate change has been the burning issue of the previous decade, at a time of other great social and political upheaval. In September 2019, millions of people from 150 countries participated in the Climate Strike. But despite all the talk and the meetings, and despite increasing awareness and activism around the issue, it does not seem like the change we need is here yet. It is time to reimagine our global economies, because the current systems for creating wealth are simply not sustainable. Right now, as wildfires sweep through some parts of the world, other areas are suffering from extreme cold. In just a few days, Bangladesh has witnessed over 50 deaths this winter. In Pakistan, a cold wave is sweeping through the country, particularly hitting hard the northern areas, with the prime minister directing his party's governments in KP and Punjab to provide temporary shelter to the homeless. As we welcome the new year, the world's leaders and decision-makers must put climate at the forefront of their agendas. May 2020 be the year of decisive action, and not merely words.

## **Health crises**

THE past year proved to be injurious to the collective health of Pakistanis. The already paltry federal health budget was further slashed by half as the challenge appeared to worsen with several disease outbreaks — eg, dengue, HIV/AIDS,

XDR-typhoid and polio. This was also pointed out by the Pakistan Medical Association in a statement issued on the first day of the new year. It is evident that much of the deteriorating state of the nation's health can be attributed to government negligence. So much could have been avoided. Had the government taken timely measures, the aftermath of the 2019 monsoon would not have seen such high numbers of dengue cases in Punjab and Sindh or XDR-typhoid in the latter province. According to the PMA, more than 50,000 cases of dengue fever were reported across the country in 2019, nearly double the figure in the preceding decade. Meanwhile, in August alone, as many as 4,700 cases of XDR-typhoid were reported in Sindh with 3,000 in Karachi — the authorities would have done well to launch a vaccination drive in the city, and not only in schools. There were also two separate outbreaks of HIV/AIDS in 2019 — in Sargodha and in Larkana district — only a couple of months apart. Shockingly, more than 700 victims of the HIV/AIDS outbreak in Larkana were children. What must also be mentioned is the shortage of/lack of access to the rabies vaccine, which was reportedly responsible for the painful deaths of some 30 people in Sindh. And, new polio cases kept emerging throughout the year, with the total national tally reaching 119.

The PMA is right in pointing out that the lack of proper planning, political will and a timely response aggravated the intensity and prevalence of these illnesses. As we usher in 2020 as the 'year of economic growth', it should be remembered that serious diseases will continue to afflict the people of Pakistan even beyond the current year. Sick nations seldom travel far, but improved healthcare could ensure economic progress.

## **Rana Sanaullah's demand**

GIVEN the facts so far apparent, Rana Sanaullah's demand that a judicial probe be conducted into the drug smuggling case against him is a reasonable one. The PML-N Punjab president was on his way from Lahore to Faisalabad in July when he was arrested by the Anti-Narcotics Force which claimed to have recovered 15kg of heroin from the vehicle in which he was travelling. Mr Sanaullah was recently granted bail by the Lahore High Court in a ruling that found visible "lapses in the prosecution case" and procedural irregularities on the ANF's part. Even while the verdict said that further investigation was needed to determine whether he was guilty, it noted that the accused was a prominent political leader



and, most damningly, that “political victimisation in our country is an open secret”. While speaking to the media on Wednesday, Mr Sanaullah maintained that the ANF had fabricated the charges against him; he also accused Minister for Narcotics Control Shehryar Afridi of falsely claiming to have video evidence proving his guilt.

The case appears to have become an albatross around the government’s neck. It has been a bizarre matter from the outset. A firebrand critic of the PTI, Mr Sanaullah had in the weeks preceding his arrest voiced apprehension of exactly such a development. Why then would he, that too as a senior PML-N leader, be ferrying such a huge amount of contraband in his vehicle? Moreover, the evidence touted as earlier pointing to an open-and-shut case seems to be anything but. Mr Afridi has created further confusion by his remarks that contradict those given by the ANF on the issue. On Tuesday, members of the cabinet asked tough questions of the DG ANF and the minister for narcotics control over their handling of the case, which has left the government red-faced. While the final outcome of the charges against Mr Sanaullah is yet to be determined, the proceedings have further sullied the concept of accountability under the PTI government.

## **Revenue jitters**

THE visit that Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance Hafeez Shaikh recently paid to the offices of the Federal Board of Revenue was clearly more than just a courtesy call. No press release was issued by the Finance Division or the FBR about the meeting, but those present spoke quite expansively about what happened — and what they had to say does not paint a pleasant picture. The Finance Division, which has to take ultimate ownership of the IMF programme and its successful implementation, is not happy with the pace of revenue collection, and also appears fed up with the absence of any vision for future reform of the FBR. In this respect, the timing of the visit is important to note. It came the day after the FBR announced its revenue collection figures for the first half of the ongoing fiscal year, and the shortfall has widened to Rs287bn. The visit also came a few days after the IMF board approved the first review of the ongoing Fund programme and the detailed review documents show that the Fund, despite acknowledging the fiscal adjustment and the fact that the primary

deficit was above its target range, still pointed at the 'quality' of revenue collection and the role of quite a few one-off items in helping to meet the target.

Meanwhile, the chairman FBR congratulated himself on social media when announcing the revenue figures, pointing out there is growth of 16pc in the quantum of collections compared to the same period last year. That may be true, but given high inflation and the growth rate, 16pc growth in revenue collection is to be expected even if there was no additional revenue effort. So there is not much here to boast about. Mr Shaikh is said to be unimpressed. And given the urgency of meeting the IMF targets, he views the shortfalls as a serious risk to the programme. If the shortfalls continue, the possibility of new revenue measures in the next few months cannot be ruled out. Something needs to change fast to pre-empt that possibility. Given the slow pace of growth, and shrinking imports, reliance on the traditional heads is not going to help. This is the time for innovative thinking, and better leadership at the governmental level. Left to their own devices, the bureaucrats of the FBR will be unable to develop any such vision. The government has to step forward with a stronger hand.

## More threats

ANYONE who thought that a change of command in the Indian army would lead to fewer threats emanating from across the border should think again.

Taking a cue from his bellicose predecessor, India's new army chief Lt Gen M.M. Naravane has said that conducting pre-emptive strikes across the LoC remained an option for India.

Read: Pakistan rejects new Indian army chief's 'irresponsible statement on pre-emptive strikes across LoC'

Pakistan's Foreign Office has given the right response: "There should be no doubt about Pakistan's resolve and readiness to thwart any aggressive Indian move inside its territory of AJ&K. No one should forget Pakistan's befitting response to India's Balakot misadventure."

The previous army chief Bipin Rawat, now elevated to the post of chief of defence staff, had made a habit of issuing threatening statements against Pakistan that smacked of political posturing more than anything substantive. Much of this belligerence had led India into the Balakot misadventure with

disastrous results both militarily and politically. Clearly, New Delhi has learnt no lessons.

The Foreign Office has done well to remind the new Indian army chief that the last time India attempted “pre-emptive strikes” it lost two aircraft and one pilot.

It also lost face.

The pilot was returned in good faith by Pakistan. This good faith has not been reciprocated.

On the contrary, India has been growling persistently without any tangible reason except to play to the domestic gallery.

This is dangerous.

Pakistan has demonstrated that it will not allow India to cross red lines, and if India does so, there shall be reciprocity. Pakistan has also displayed that it has the capability and will to defend its territory.

The new Indian army chief might want to get a full briefing on the Balakot misadventure before issuing any more provocative and irresponsible statements.

Pakistan on its part needs to be on full alert.

India is trapped in violent domestic convulsions that are creating dangerous fault lines within its society. The right-wing government of Narendra Modi is struggling to contain the fallout of its anti-Muslim policies. It may be tempted to embark on yet another misadventure across the LoC to divert attention from its domestic troubles.

Pakistan may therefore want to reiterate its well-established red lines and also communicate forcefully to New Delhi and the international community that no Indian strike anywhere on Pakistani territory will go unanswered. This may also be an appropriate time to disabuse India of the notion that it has found some space under the nuclear overhang after Balakot. No such space exists anywhere except in the minds of India’s military planners.

Pakistan may need to step up its diplomatic game to bring key international capitals into the loop about India’s aggressive manoeuvres and rhetoric that have no place in bilateral relations between two neighbours.

Conflict suits no one, least of all two countries armed with nuclear weapons. India should dial down this posturing without delay.

## **Soleimani's killing**

A VARIETY of adjectives are being used to describe the American air strike that killed Qassem Soleimani, head of the Iranian Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a senior commander of Iraq's Hashd al-Shaabi, near Baghdad airport early on Friday. 'Reckless', 'foolish' and 'provocative' seem to top the list.

Indeed, in a Middle East already on a knife-edge, the US action risks sparking a major confrontation with Iran.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has called for "harsh revenge" for the killing while the Islamic Republic's foreign minister has termed the American move a "dangerous and foolish escalation".

Russia, an Iranian ally, has said Washington has taken a "reckless step" while France says it sees an "escalation under way".

Pakistan has also expressed its "deep concern" in the aftermath of the killing. Even within the US many lawmakers — who have no love lost for the Iranian general — have questioned the logic of President Donald Trump's move. These reactions illustrate that this is no ordinary killing, and there is genuine alarm in world capitals that the assassination may spark something much bigger.

Soleimani was probably Iran's best-known military figure, a powerful man with a direct line to the supreme leader. He was one of the principal architects of Iran's muscular foreign policy in the Middle East that put him in the cross hairs of the US and its regional allies.

As for the immediate background to the killing, Iraqi militiamen with close links to Iran had stormed the American embassy in Baghdad earlier this week, which was seen as a reaction to the killing of Iran-backed fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Iranian missions had also been attacked a few months ago in Najaf, Karbala and Basra; Tehran saw the US and its Arab foes as being responsible for instigating the attacks. But even before this series of events, America and Iran had been on a collision course, particularly after Mr Trump unilaterally withdrew from the

nuclear deal in 2018, and to many it was only a matter of time before things spiralled out of control.

If saner counsel does not prevail, the assassination of Gen Soleimani may be the spark that sets the Middle East alight in a new conflagration.

At this point, Iran needs to show a mature and measured response. Though one of its most senior commanders has been killed, it must not act in haste.

The hawks in the US administration have long been itching for a fight with Tehran, and the strike appears to have been designed to elicit a strong reaction. But for the sake of its own people Iran must resist taking the bait.

Moreover, regional states and world powers must play their role to de-escalate the situation and ensure such provocations are not repeated by either side as a new war in the region is definitely not in the interest of world peace.

## **Etisalat's offer**

THE offer made by Etisalat, the UAE-based cellular mobile operator that acquired 26pc shareholding in PTCL back in 2005 for \$2.6bn, to pay \$275m and consider it as settlement of its outstanding payment of \$800m is a pittance and signifies the immense weakness of the position that Pakistan is negotiating from. It is perhaps futile to ask whether the offer should be accepted or not. The amount has been outstanding for 13 years now, and there is nothing that three different governments have been able to do to get Etisalat to pay up. A refusal at this point may well mean waiting another 13 years for the next offer, and even then there is no way to guarantee that a better deal will be offered. Regardless of what the government decides, the damage that recklessness in privatisation decisions can do has been amply demonstrated. This is worth bearing in mind as the government gears up once again to reactivate the country's privatisation programme that has been stalled since the fateful steel mill judgement of 2006.

The privatisation of PTCL was supposed to be a case study on how entire sectors of the economy can be revived and innovation ushered in as the private sector is invited to play a greater role in areas that had for decades been the exclusive domain of the state. At the time of the privatisation, the government had three bids to evaluate, in which Etisalat bid \$1.96 per share, China Mobile \$1.06 and Singapore Telecom \$0.88 per share for 1.36bn shares of the

company. The price differential was gigantic, and immediately Etisalat announced its reluctance to follow through on the bid. The then prime minister Shaukat Aziz, instead of allowing Etisalat to bow out and taking the second bidder's offer, invested tremendous personal time, effort and credibility in persuading Etisalat to stay on board. The lynchpin of his counter offer was to stagger the payments over an extended period of time, which Etisalat took but not to pay the balance. Today, we see where the unseemly haste and eagerness that was in evidence for the sake of a few more dollars landed the country. The dollars did not materialise, and Etisalat did not prove a superior custodian of the country's innovative drive in mobile telecommunications. Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance Hafeez Shaikh should bear this background in mind when he proceeds with his own privatisation programme in the months ahead

## **Missing persons' advocate**

It can only be described as the cruellest of ironies that a man who devoted many years of his life fighting for missing persons would himself become a victim of enforced disappearance.

In the early hours of Dec 17, advocate Inamur Rahim, a retired military lawyer, was abducted at gunpoint by unidentified individuals from his home, in the presence of members of his family. It was only on Thursday that the Rawalpindi bench of the Lahore High Court was finally informed by a representative of the Ministry of Defence that Mr Rahim was being held by its subordinate agency under the Pakistan Army Act for an alleged and unspecified violation of the Official Secrets Act.

This, however, does not explain why he was kidnapped from his home in lieu of a formal indictment, or his continued detention without informing his distraught family of his whereabouts or granting him access to legal counsel.

Besides now granting such access to family and lawyers, the ministry must demonstrate that Mr Rahim's due process rights have not been and are not being violated, and that he can be guaranteed a fair trial under such circumstances. Serious as the substantive charges against him may be, they do not give the state carte blanche to throw procedural law out of the window. Moreover, given the nature of Mr Rahim's work and the fact that he has previously faced threats in the course of such work, the ministry must at the very least satisfy the court that

there are legitimate grounds on which to charge him and that his detention does not constitute a form of harassment.

In this entire murky episode, one thing is certain: the public's growing disquiet over a general escalation of abuse of powers by state institutions increasingly embodying the bewildering, convoluted logic of a Kafkaesque nightmare. The defence ministry must clarify how Mr Rahim's detention is not a reflection of this phenomenon in order to assuage such concerns.

## **World policeman**

THE killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in Baghdad early on Friday by the US sends several messages to America's foes.

The most obvious of these signals is that American exceptionalism prevails and that Washington plays by its own rules, throwing international conventions to the wind.

This may temporarily prove to the world that the US remains the globe's primary military and economic power. Yet the turbulence such reckless actions cause to the international order in the long term is considerable, something that the policymakers in Washington seem completely unconcerned about.

Moreover, such unilateralism only adds to anti-Americanism amongst the nations of the world, with people feeling that the US cannot be trusted.

Clearly, there is no remorse or afterthought in America's power circles; in a tweet following a conversation with army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa after Gen Soleimani's assassination, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said "our resolve in protecting American interests ... will not waver", indicating that such actions will continue.

The fact is that America's desire to act as global policeman has played a major role in creating a more unstable world, including a more volatile Middle East, especially in the period following the Second World War.

Different American administrations have backed tinpot dictators and cruel regimes from Latin America to Africa, all the while helping thwart democratic

movements, particularly if the movements espoused socialist or nationalist tendencies.

In the Middle East, it has supported potentates and strongmen as long as they have danced to Washington's tune, while expressing anger with regimes that have refused to play along.

Much of the mess in the Middle East today is the work of American interventionism and desire for regime change; Saddam Hussein, once a client as long as he was useful against Iran, was quickly toppled after dubious claims of weapons of mass destruction were conjured up in order to get rid of him. Israel has long enjoyed American patronage, as the US has shielded its principal Middle Eastern client from global criticism, even though Tel Aviv's hands are soaked in Palestinian blood. Israel has also violated the sovereignty of its neighbours multiple times. Also, Syria and Libya today are broken states because Washington and its allies felt it was time to remove Bashar al-Assad and Muammar Qadhafi; both these individuals are/were brutal autocrats, but plans of regime change hatched in foreign capitals have helped destroy Syria and Libya.

Washington under successive governments — particularly under Donald Trump's watch — has come a long way from the Fourteen Points championed by Woodrow Wilson for world peace.

The operative American policy seems to be 'shoot first and ask questions later'. However, this reckless unilateralism has created a more dangerous world, and unless there is a change of course, it will imperil American interests across continents as Washington's foes decide to answer in the same coin.

## **Patch-up in Sindh?**

THE phase may be short-lived, but it appears that the PTI-led federal government is starting to shed its cloak of arrogance and engage with the Sindh government. Earlier in the week, a delegation of senior PTI leaders — Federal Minister for Planning and Special Initiative Asad Umar, Federal Minister for Maritime Affairs Ali Zaidi and Sindh Governor Imran Ismail — held a press conference to announce their willingness to work with the provincial government for Karachi's development. Mr Umar said that despite serious ideological



differences with the Sindh government, the centre, taking a ‘principled decision’, was ready to work with it to resolve the issues of the province including Karachi. He said his government had released funds for the Green Line bus project and would soon reach an agreement with the province regarding progress on the K-IV water project as well. Mentioning other development schemes for Karachi, he said there should be no politics when it came to serving the people.

Though Mr Umar’s assurance is encouraging, it is in stark contrast to his party’s behaviour over the past year and a half. The PTI had secured 13 National Assembly seats from Karachi, more than any other party, yet it chose to ignore the country’s economic hub that brought it to power. The federal government set up the Karachi Transformation Committee last year that had no representation from the democratically elected provincial setup. Over the months, senior PTI leaders, including the prime minister, have snubbed the Sindh government. Hence, their decision to engage with it now can only be welcomed — and one hopes it goes beyond their fear of the PPP striking a deal with the MQM-P. Indeed, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has time and again expressed his willingness to talk to the federal government. This is not to say that the PPP-led setup is blameless where provincial governance is concerned — it is just as guilty, if not more, of neglecting Karachi as the centre. Both sides should refrain from souring this much-delayed thaw and stop pointing fingers at one another over the myriad challenges that beset the province. If the federal government is indeed serious about resolving the issues of the people of Karachi, it would do well to stop taking its position for granted, and continue on the path to reconciliation. It needs much more than a few statements to smoothen the feathers it has ruffled along the way.

## **Soil erosion**

ACCORDING to the UN, approximately 820m people suffer from hunger. As the world comes to terms with the effects of climate change on food security, there is an additional challenge confronting us all: the quality of the soil used for farming and growing crops. In recent reports on the state of the soil, scientists warn that intensive farming practices, the use of harsh chemicals in fertilisers and pesticides, and deforestation, along with expanding urban space and grazing land, have resulted in large-scale erosion of the earth’s topsoil. Since the bulk of food is grown on the top layer of the soil, this loss of land not only damages the

fertility of the land and thus the ability to grow nutritious food, it also negatively impacts the soil's role in regulating global temperatures. Unless some of the harm is reversed in the next decade or so, scientists warn that the implications of continued soil damage and erosion for global hunger — and even global peace and stability — do not look good.

This report is particularly significant for countries like Pakistan: an agricultural economy, which suffers disproportionately from the effects of climate change. Due to several factors — deforestation, the construction of dams and barrages that retain the natural sediment load, and the lack of awareness of water-management and rainwater-harvesting techniques — there has been a steady erosion of fertile land, particularly for the coastal communities. Last year, farmers from villages along the shrinking Indus delta region embarked on a 140km journey from Kharo Chan to Thatta to draw the government's attention to their plight. The region has been suffering from a shortage of freshwater and loss of fertile land due to rising sea levels and salinity, which is blamed on the construction and management of the Kotri Barrage. It seems that no matter how much scientific or industrial 'progress' our civilisations make, everything about the state of the environment strongly hints at a need to go back to the basics.

## **Absentee leadership**

IT is becoming an increasingly visible trend now that wherever important decisions are being made the person most conspicuous by his absence is the prime minister himself.

At the moment, entire sectors of the economy are landing up in situations that necessitate public appeals and pose potentially catastrophic threats to the continuity of business.

The oil and gas sector, automobiles and textiles are examples — each is saddled with its own peculiar set of problems. Meanwhile, one after another we are seeing fuel and power tariff hikes, in some cases born of genuine necessity but in others clearly designed to compensate for the lack of governance. The hikes in the power tariff recently notified, as well as the increase in the gas tariff, clearly point to a critical lack of governance in the system.

On Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan was in Faisalabad to cut a ribbon for a Special Economic Zone project for the Chinese; he followed this up with a meal at a shelter for the poor and homeless. It is laudable indeed that the prime minister continues to place such importance on the plight of the poor and displays a very genuine concern for how the poor are being impacted by his own government's ongoing economic adjustment under a stringent IMF programme.

But stopping by for a meal or cutting a ribbon is nothing substantive — it is of ceremonial significance only.

Investors in existing SEZs say they almost regret their decision to invest since the government has violated the commitments it has made to them, whether they pertain to a tax-exempt status for enterprises in SEZs or the provision of infrastructure. And shelters for the poor created in a highly publicised blitz are operating without any commitment by the provincial government of fiscal resources to meet the expenditures, thus casting a shadow over their sustainability.

Today, appeals from industry are increasing, whether against the tax authorities for withheld refunds or non-payment of bills in the power sector, or against the absence of gas or refiners on the point of closing down operations due to the pile-up of the furnace oil inventory.

In every area, there is a sense of drift, a derelict state of governance, and the consequences of neglect are getting to be more and more visible.

The polio virus has made a spectacular return, thanks to the juvenile decision of the PTI leadership to place their social media team leader in charge of the polio programme. Industry is sagging and is reduced to issuing public appeals.

Parliament is prostrate and borrowing is on the increase, while the costs of neglect are passed on to the consumers, whether through power or gas tariffs.

The country is now crying out for leadership at the top, somebody to pull it all together. An absentee prime minister is not working to solve problems and set the direction.

# Presidential powers

WHAT is the scope of the president's powers as defined in the fundamental law of the land? On Friday, the Islamabad High Court raised this important question while hearing a petition challenging the presidential ordinances issued under the PTI government as being illegal, ultra vires the Constitution and "promulgated in a mala fide manner". Appointing senior lawyers as amicus curiae, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah framed several questions to help arrive at a decision. First, does Article 89 of the Constitution allow the head of state to exercise his powers "in a routine manner to bypass the legislative procedure prescribed under Article 70 to 88?" Second, are the ordinances, "passed by the president in exercise of powers under Article 89 of the Constitution ... of the nature which meets the prescribed requirements in this regard?" The third query pertains to the fate of the ordinances if they were passed "in violation of the specific conditions" stipulated under the relevant article.

The issue is particularly relevant under the incumbent government. Unfortunately, rather than giving due importance to parliament's legislative role in a democracy, it has relied excessively on presidential ordinances. Given that the 18th Amendment in 2010 had drastically clipped presidential powers, it becomes all the more ironic that the head of state's limited and conditional legislative power is being deployed so frequently. Article 89 expressly stipulates two conditions that must be met if an ordinance is to be promulgated: that neither the Senate nor the National Assembly is in session at the time, and that "circumstances exist which render it necessary to take immediate action". Moreover, the 18th Amendment had laid down that the lifespan of an ordinance cannot exceed two 120-day periods. Such time-bound legislation cannot have any durable effect or address system flaws, making it all the more baffling why the government repeatedly chooses to resort to it. According to the National Assembly website, President Arif Alvi has issued 24 ordinances since Sept 24, 2018, most of which seem to be based on no apparent circumstantial exigency. While previous governments too have at times employed the mechanism, the prevailing pattern seems an extension of the PTI government's oft-expressed contempt for many fellow legislators that are not part of its coalition. The opposition has frequently decried this legislation-by-ordinance route as a way to bypass parliament and render it irrelevant. It is moreover a short-sighted approach that will stymie the PTI's own reforms agenda.

## **Collapsing standards**

A FEW days ago, a three-year-old girl was miraculously pulled out from the rubble of a building that had collapsed in Sukkur some 24 hours before. But another child — a one-year-old boy — tragically succumbed to his injuries in the same period of time. Relief efforts saw a number of people being rescued from what remained of the four-storey residential building, built on top of several shops, but there were some who did not survive. The tragedy came in the wake of another building collapsing in Karachi's Ranchhore Lines area a week ago. Like a scene from a war zone, cameras captured the six-storey structure as it crumbled into thin air, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and debris, while bystanders could be seen running for cover. Fortunately, the residency had been emptied after the danger it posed became apparent. Residents evacuated with their belongings in the early hours of the morning, and no fatalities were thus recorded. Reportedly, only the first and ground floors of that building had been approved for construction, in accordance with its original architectural design, while the remaining floors were built with shoddy material in later years. These events once again raise questions about illegal construction in the province, the use of substandard material, and the lack of oversight by the Sindh Building Control Authority, which is responsible for supervising and regulating building construction in large parts of Karachi and Sukkur.

Such tragedies are the all-too-common outcome of greed and criminal neglect on the part of property builders and sellers. Last year, in September, a couple died when a portion of their residential building collapsed on them in Kharadar in Karachi. And in February, another three-storey building collapsed in Malir in the early hours of the day. Four people died, and many others suffered injuries, including small children, who could be heard crying from underneath the rubble during the rescue operation. In the quest for profit, public safety cannot be treated as an afterthought.

## **Iran nuclear deal**

ONE of the more ominous developments in the aftermath of Gen Qassem Soleimani's killing in Baghdad last week has been Iran's announcement on

Sunday that it will no longer abide by the restrictions placed on it by the 2015 nuclear deal.

President Donald Trump had all but sealed the fate of the deal after unilaterally withdrawing the US from the multilateral agreement in 2018. Now, with Tehran's latest announcement, clearly in reaction to Soleimani's assassination, the deal is practically dead.

Iran was already not getting any major economic benefits from the historic accord, hailed as a triumph of international diplomacy when it was reached between Iran and the P5+1 — the five permanent UNSC members plus Germany.

The main reason for this was that global firms were afraid to trade with Iran fearing other US sanctions. Sure enough, with the arrival of Mr Trump in the White House in 2017, the future of the Obama-era deal seemed murky, as the incumbent president had promised to withdraw from it in the run-up to the presidential campaign.

Subsequently, America's exit led to a crippling regime of sanctions that has done major damage to Iran's economy. Now, as the Washington-Tehran confrontation enters extremely dangerous territory, Iran's decision to end its commitments may give the Trump administration an excuse to up the ante against the Islamic Republic even more.

In such dangerous times Iran must act with prudence and foresight. There is indeed great anger and sorrow in the country over Gen Soleimani's assassination. This can be gauged by the massive crowds that have taken to the streets to pay their last respects to the Quds Force commander.

In pictures: Iraqis, Palestinians join Iran in honouring Soleimani, others killed in US air strike

However, Iran's reaction to the provocation must be mature and keep the interests of its people in mind. In case of a full-blown war, the Islamic Republic will have to face even greater hardships, something it cannot afford with an already enfeebled economy. Tehran has a right to respond and defend itself, but its actions must be proportionate and keep ground realities in mind.

While Iran needs to reconsider its departure from the nuclear deal, the world community must do more to censure Mr Trump's reckless comments. For

example, his brash threat to target “52 Iranian sites [...] important to Iran & the Iranian culture” is beyond the pale. Does the US leader intend to target religious or historical sites in Iran? If this is the case then — as Human Rights Watch and other observers have noted — it may constitute a war crime.

This deeply disturbing notion is a far cry from what Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s former president, once advocated in the form of the ‘dialogue among civilisations’. Instead of dialogue, warmongers in Washington are preparing a casus belli against Iran based on very shaky foundations. Iran must resist this dangerous provocation and act with prudence.

## **Violence under Modi**

INDIA continues to slide into chaos. On Sunday, a group of masked men stormed the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi and unleashed violence on the students and teachers there. Armed with sticks and iron rods, the assailants broke into dormitories, viciously beat up people, damaged property and walked away without being challenged by the police. They have been identified as belonging to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the ruling BJP. The attack on JNU comes in the wake of earlier attacks on educational institutions in which many students were injured. Incidents of violence are spreading across India ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s right-wing government passed controversial citizenship laws that are seen as challenging the secular credentials of the country. India’s lurch towards intolerance, extremism and state-sponsored violence has led to scores of fatalities and triggered a political crisis that has pit the central government against many states and sections of the majority Hindu population against minorities.

An unstable India swirling in a whirlpool of fanatical beliefs is a danger to all its neighbours, and specifically to Pakistan. Unhinged from its secular moorings, the republic is swaying perilously in the storm generated by an aggressive Hindutva policy. With the state under Mr Modi actively promoting and propagating an exclusionary political and social agenda, the prospects of Indian society rupturing even further are increasing by the day. As Nehruvian India unravels, it may be critical for Pakistan and the rest of the world to try and contain the toxic fallout of this self-propelled crisis. The fires of hate, bigotry and racism burning in the BJP’s India must not be allowed to spread uncontrolled across that country and

outside its borders. There is a considerable risk that the Indian prime minister could ignite a conflict with Pakistan to distract attention from his country's rapid slide into totalitarianism. With the region already on tenterhooks after America's assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, the last thing we need is India drifting into further disarray and lashing out against Pakistan. An unstable and violence-plagued India does not suit Pakistan. Islamabad should stay alert against any misadventure by New Delhi but at the same time join hands with the international community to ensure that minorities in India are secured against state violence and persecution. India's regression as a functional state should worry everyone, most of all Indians themselves.

## **Antisera plant**

THE establishment of an antisera plant by the National Institute of Health enabling Pakistan to become self-sufficient in the production of anti-rabies and anti-venom serums, along with anti-tetanus and anti-diphtheria serums, is welcome news. The plant is expected to begin production in mid-February and would help overcome the acute shortage of vaccines across the country. The past year was marred by frequent reports of painful deaths caused by dog bites due to the shortage of anti-rabies serums in public hospitals in Punjab and Sindh. Cases of dog bite are very common in many parts of the country, especially in the provinces mentioned. Their prevalence can be gauged from the fact that between January 2019 and August 2019, more than 11,000 people were bitten by dogs in Sindh alone, leading to at least 25 deaths in the province last year. Similarly, according to some estimates, incidents of snakebites across the country cause up to 50,000 deaths a year.

According to NIH officials, the country requires up to 90,000 vials of the anti-venom serum, about 50,000 vials of the anti-rabies serum and some 30,000 vials each of the anti-tetanus and anti-diphtheria serums. Up till now, the NIH has only been able to produce around one-third of the country's requirements. However, with the establishment of this plant, it is now expected that by June, Pakistan will not only become self-sufficient in antidotes for these four dangerous maladies but surplus production will also enable it to export lifesaving vaccines to other countries. Hopefully, the production process of these vaccines will not be delayed like the establishment of the production plant itself — the idea of establishing such a plant was first conceived in the early 2000s. That said, this commendable



effort might also benefit from a mechanism for tracking the supply, use and expiration of vaccines. The loopholes in Pakistan's dilapidated healthcare system are there for all to see. It would be wise to not let this achievement fall prey to rampant mismanagement and incompetence.

## **Legislation on COAS's tenure**

AFTER a series of missteps, assertions, denials and general confusion that extended over several months, the issue of the army chief's tenure should, in all probability, be laid to rest today in the Senate. In fact, the National Assembly yesterday passed three bills that regulate the tenures of not only the army, but all the services' chiefs. It is now for the upper house to pass the proposed legislation. Following the president's assent — a mere formality — the bills will become law, as per the constitutionally mandated procedure. However, adherence to procedure is not the end-all and be-all in a democratic system. In this crucial matter, the people's representatives have been remiss in their duty to those whose votes have put them in parliament, for they have been unforthcoming, even cagey, about the rationale behind their unquestioning support for the legislation.

For one, there is the question of timing. Why did the legislators not wait for the outcome of the judicial review requested by the government against the Supreme Court judgement pertaining to army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's tenure, which directed parliament to regulate the terms and conditions of the COAS's office? What motivated the National Assembly, led by a government that obviously did not agree with the court's logic, to rush into this exercise regardless? Furthermore, the government's ill-fated notification in August about Gen Bajwa's extension had given the "regional security environment" as the justification for its decision to retain him as army chief for another three years. Was that even a substantive factor in the legislators' decision to pass the bills? We do not know, because notwithstanding a few dissenting voices, there was no debate on the issue. Instead, a discord-ridden parliament that drags its feet on important legislation when it chooses, seems to have effortlessly found itself 'on the same page' this time around. The opposition, which had initially objected to the "undue haste" with which the process was being conducted, meekly surrendered, taking back even the few amendments it had proposed in the bills. One of them, that the parliamentary committee on national security be assigned a role in the

reappointment of the services chiefs and chairman joint chiefs of staff committee, was particularly worth considering. A more broad-based civilian input in such decisions could have prevented the impression of a prime minister acting on a whim or out of personal compulsions.

With its blunderbuss approach to the question of Gen Bajwa's extension, which the ISPR has more than once asserted he was reluctant to accept, the PTI government dragged the military into a needless controversy. It can now heave a sigh of relief that the matter has resolved itself without a murmur of resistance in parliament. Sadly, the argument that institution-building is the best strategy for a stronger Pakistan has been indefinitely deferred.

## **SBP report**

THE first detailed report of the State Bank on the economy in the first quarter of the ongoing fiscal year has just been released and it paints a disquieting picture of the developments it covers. The headline item in the report is the State Bank's assertion that the economy is unlikely to meet the GDP growth target of 4pc by the end of the fiscal year. On the face of it, this is not a thunderous announcement, especially since much of it has already been noted by the IMF and the Asian Development Bank. But coming from the State Bank, it carries additional weight; after all, it is a Pakistani institution that is adding its voice to the growing chorus of scepticism over this target. It is important to keep this in mind, because many of the other projections that the government is counting on, principally on the revenue side, depend on this target. An acknowledgement that the overall slowdown in the economy is set to persist is significant, and unless the second quarter sees some real green shoots of recovery, there is little reason to doubt what the State Bank is pointing out. Needless to say, all indicators thus far confirm that the second quarter has seen no meaningful uptick in the pace of economic activity.

Alongside this, the bank also stands by its inflation forecast, saying average monthly inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index will remain within 11pc-12pc by the year end. This forecast could be challenged, given the large fuel and power price increases that have just been, or are about to be, passed through. Monthly average inflation is already hovering near the upper limit of this forecast, at 11.8pc, and further pressures might push it to breach the ceiling.

How the government manages to keep this pressure in place, while actively trying to quicken the pace of economic growth in the remaining months of the fiscal year, is not yet clear. Additionally, a detailed reading of the report shows that the fiscal indicators may well have become better, but much of this improvement has been achieved through price increases in power and fuel, from where a large portion of the incremental tax collection has come. Given the details revealed in the report, it is unlikely that stabilisation efforts are going to end anytime soon.

## **A case of exploding egos?**

THE raid on Maktaba-i-Daniyal is as disturbing as it is baffling. Indeed, the truth could not be any stranger than the fiction in the pages of Mohammed Hanif's own tragicomedies.

Late last year, the publisher released the Urdu translation of Mr Hanif's debut novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, a satirical account of the last days of Gen Ziaul Haq's rule and the aftermath of his death.

On Monday, according to the author's statements on Twitter, some individuals claiming to be from the intelligence barged into the publisher's office, confiscated all copies of the book and said they would return for a list of its distributors.

Read: Author Mohammed Hanif says Urdu publisher of his bestseller raided

A week prior, the author wrote, they had received a defamation notice from the late general's son over the 11-year-old novel.

Such retrospective umbrage — that, too, for a work of art that makes no pretence of masquerading as fact (and, ergo, is not libellous) — might be interpreted in a number of ways, none of which are flattering to the belligerents.

Mr Hanif, a Sitara-i-Imtiaz recipient, is an internationally renowned writer and journalist whose work stands on its own merit.

Phat'tay Aamon Ka Case would have surely enjoyed modest success without the gauche intervention of 'well-meaning' individuals seeking to provide it free publicity, particularly given that its contents include plenty of intrigue as it is.

If, however, certain elements have taken it upon themselves to serve as Pakistan's literary police, one can only wonder what they might make of other famous texts.

Would these exalted critics read novels like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as cautionary tales or as instruction manuals? Or Kafka's *The Trial* as a template for obscuring the state's machinery from scrutiny and accountability?

In the absence of clarity from the authorities, a pessimist might view a raid on a publisher's office in a far more sinister light: a sign of growing intolerance, perhaps, or an attempt to whitewash opinion of Pakistan's most vulnerable demographic — the disgraced dictator.

## **Iranian FM's visa issue**

THE UN is supposed to be a global forum where geopolitical adversaries can discuss their differences in front of the comity of nations in order to avoid conflict. However, if one party is denied a hearing, the utility of this multilateral forum becomes questionable, as the UN is supposed to be a democratic institution, not a glorified talk shop like the erstwhile League of Nations.

But in the aftermath of Iranian Gen Qassem Soleimani's assassination by the US, Washington is throwing its weight around by blocking Tehran's full access to the UN. As reported, the American administration has denied a visa to Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, stopping him from attending a Security Council session in New York as there was "not enough time" to process the request.

The US move to deny Iran's top diplomat access to the UN may violate the 'headquarters agreement' Washington signed with the UN when the global body was set up. America has a right to allow or deny access to anyone as far as its own soil is concerned, yet it should not be allowed to use access to the UN as a political tool to punish its rivals.

Previously, severe critics of the US had been allowed to attend UN sessions without major problems arising. For example, much before the Americans dropped its 'terrorist' designation for the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the late 1980s, Yasser Arafat made a memorable speech at the UN in 1974. Moreover, at the height of the Cold War, Cuba's Fidel Castro and the Soviet

Union's Nikita Khrushchev used the UN rostrum to deliver fiery speeches condemning their rival capitalist bloc.

And in contrast to the urbane Mr Zarif, Iran's hard-line former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was allowed to attend UN sessions to denounce his geopolitical rivals. If America's adversaries are not allowed to come to New York for UN sessions, then the democratic spirit of the body is violated, making it a mere instrument for great power bullying.

## **SDG challenge**

PAKISTAN'S downward trajectory where a number of development indicators, especially those related to food security, health and sanitation, are concerned has been widely discussed. In the past four years, we have slid at least 15 notches on the UN Sustainable Development Goals index. The country ranked 115th in 2016, went down to 117th in 2017, and then to 122nd in 2018 before reaching the 130th spot in 2019. Sadly, considering the strained economy, poor governance and high inflation, the living conditions of millions of Pakistanis will only get worse. It is ironic that Pakistan was among the first countries that translated the Millennium Development Goals into national goals and came up with a detailed framework for achieving them. However, Pakistan had missed several major goals related to health and climate by the conclusion of the MDG time frame in 2015. Similarly, after the Sustainable Development Summit of 2015, Pakistan was again one of the first countries to adopt the 2030 agenda through a resolution in the National Assembly. Yet, despite the allocation of resources, foreign aid and much activity in bureaucratic circles, the country continues to perform badly in several areas, the challenges ranging from malnutrition to education inequality. In the latest Human Development Report, Pakistan is ranked at 152, marginally below all other South Asian countries, not least because of the complexity of the developmental challenges it faces and its poor response to them.

What we lack are proper resources, political will, competent personnel and empowered local governments, while bureaucratic delays, corruption and mismanagement have worsened matters. Unfortunately, development to policymakers is an 'outside' problem to be tackled by academics and development agencies. What seems to be missing is the realisation that

development indicators also expose ineffective governance. The success of any parallel or overarching development scheme will always remain limited if governance weakens the implementation of goals. For example, the introduction of the Sehat Sahulat Card that aims to provide health insurance is a laudable step by the PTI government, but unless a serious effort is made to improve the quality of drinking water — polluted water is a major source of disease — the initiative will remain ineffective because of rising health costs. Similarly, eradicating poverty and hunger will be difficult without a reduction in food prices. The challenges for the present government are enormous. But solutions might be simpler than expected — if the decision-makers are willing to make amends.

## **FATF requirements**

THE Financial Action Task Force will decide next month if Pakistan has done enough to be removed from the grey list. If FATF decides that Pakistan has taken substantial measures to curb money laundering and terror financing, and based on its assessment removes Pakistan from the list, it would defuse a big threat to this country's economy and its standing in the international community. If, however, Pakistan is unable to satisfy FATF that it has taken sufficient steps in this direction and is downgraded to the blacklist, then the country could face severe diplomatic and financial consequences, including an uncertain fate for the ongoing IMF programme. Much, therefore, rides on what happens next month.

Much also depends on Pakistan's own progress on this front. On Tuesday, the Senate Standing Committee on Finance approved two important bills on money laundering and foreign exchange regulations to meet the requirements of FATF. Earlier, too, the National Assembly passed a crucial FATF-related bill for the exchange of information and criminals with other countries. Since the last meeting of FATF in 2019, Pakistan has been working feverishly to address all the objections raised by FATF and to build a strong case so that it can be removed from the grey list. According to available information, various government departments, ministries and relevant bodies have made significant headway in tightening laws and legislating new ones where necessary, while updating rules and regulations to satisfy the requirements of FATF. Years of neglect have clearly taken a toll, and the state has no choice but to put in a massive effort to bring transparency to its fight against terror financing and money laundering. Hard as it might be, it is the right thing to do.

It may be necessary for us to comply with FATF demands but it is also in our own interest to do so. Pakistan has been lax on these matters for too long — often as a result of misplaced priorities — and it has had to endure a heavy cost for this. Now that the state has taken a decision to crack down on all organisations that may have links with terror financing and extremism, Pakistan would be doing itself a favour by going all the way to reform its archaic system and block all loopholes that allow for the unaccounted trafficking of money. However, it is important that parliament be taken on board before next month's meeting. All steps taken so far should be discussed in the Senate and National Assembly so that the people's representatives can give their input. Pakistan has chosen the right direction and it should hold steady even beyond the requirements of FATF. We still have a long way to go to rid ourselves of the menace of terrorism and we should not lose sight of the real objective. Hopefully, FATF will recognise our efforts in this respect.

## **Iran-US climbdown**

AFTER several days of high drama in the Middle East following America's assassination of Iranian Gen Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad last week, where at one point it seemed the region was poised on the brink of another disastrous war, the temperature came down several notches on Wednesday.

The day had started with a bang, quite literally, as news broke of Iranian missile strikes targeting two American bases in Iraq. It seemed the moment many had feared was here.

However, later in the day Donald Trump — whose rash decision had ignited this latest episode — spoke to the cameras, declaring that “all is well”. It may have been an anticlimax, but a welcome one, and the international community heaved a sigh of relief.

Read: Trump tones down war rhetoric, announces more ‘punishing sanctions’ on Iran

Iranian media reported “80 American terrorists” had been killed in the strikes; Trump claimed “all of our soldiers are safe”.

Regardless of the true picture on the ground, it was clear that both sides had made their public statements and backed down, for now.

The Trump administration has, till date, been big on bravado and light on solid strategic policy, with the US president's Twitter statesmanship confounding allies and foes alike.

However, in this case perhaps wiser members of the administration have prevailed on their boss that a full-blown war with Iran is not in America's interest.

Though there is no match where technological advantage and firepower between the American and Iranian militaries are concerned, with the former having a clear edge, Trump's generals know that Tehran can cause major havoc to US interests in the Mideast.

The Iranians have said previously that American bases in the region are within their reach, and a brief preview of this was witnessed in the Iraq strikes. Moreover, there are also signs that America's Gulf Arab allies are genuinely panicked that if the situation escalates, Tehran's missiles could rain down on US bases on their territory.

On the other hand, the Iranian establishment must also have realised that while it needed to take public action to avenge Soleimani's death, total war against America would be inadvisable considering Tehran's feeble economic position and relative weakness compared to the US military machine. Therefore, both sides have managed to save face and avert a bloody showdown.

From here on, the international community will need to play a greater role to de-escalate the situation between Washington and Tehran. If the US continues to advocate for regime change in Iran and tighten an already suffocating sanctions regime against the country, it is highly unlikely the Islamic Republic will soften its tone. Moreover, Tehran should reconsider leaving the nuclear accord; and it should keep the doors of dialogue open, as in the arena of international relations situations can and do change very quickly. The danger of conflict has receded, but by no means is the situation in the Mideast back to normal.

## **Piped gas**

IT is perhaps one of this country's most cherished dreams, to pipe gas from its west where it is available in abundance, and transit it onward to the east where it is in deficit. Iran and Turkmenistan have surplus supplies of natural gas, while India has always been reliant on imports to meet its requirements. If somehow



Pakistan could be the transit country and collect fees accordingly, a significant bonanza may be possible. In later years as Pakistan's own gas deficit grew once the country's largest fields went into decline, the impetus behind the dream of piped gas increased accordingly. But geopolitics was always the stumbling bloc. Iran for years has been behind an ever tightening curtain of sanctions which makes it difficult to advance the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, even when India was willing to participate in it. And any pipeline from Turkmenistan would have to transit through Afghanistan, raising serious security risks. As a result, finding financial support for both projects was always a challenge, and even when that financial support was available as in the case of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India — or Tapi — gas pipeline, locating dependable partners in each of the countries as well as a stable security environment was always going to be a massive undertaking.

To these uncertainties, we now add pricing as another source of instability in the equation that underlies this dream. Piped gas has an advantage over imported LNG since it should be cheaper, and far more reliable as a source of supply once the pipeline infrastructure is laid down. But the government has now decided to renegotiate the price with Turkmenistan, prompting India to do the same. This is the big issue with piped gas: there is no market based pricing for it as there is for LNG. Since the pipeline only connects a small number of buyers with one supplier, the price has to be negotiated between them. And because the project has a long gestation period, and the countries involved have a weak commitment to the project, regular pricing disputes are likely to mar the outlook. For the moment, the Turkmen authorities seem to be willing to make another price review and will be sending a team to Islamabad shortly. But it would be a good idea to not activate this option too often since it reduces the credibility of Pakistan as a buyer.

## **Turtle trafficking**

ON Wednesday, the Sindh Wildlife Department rescued 54 Indian soft-shelled turtles from poachers in Larkana after a two-month search. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the freshwater turtle is listed as a threatened species, and is subject to international trade controls. The rare snout-nosed reptile is only found in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and it is essential to the river ecosystems of the areas it inhabits. Pakistan hosts eight species of

freshwater turtles and five marine turtles — all are protected under the wildlife conservation laws. Tragically, despite being one of the most ancient animals on earth, their numbers are fast dwindling due to rampant illegal trade; harmful fishing practices and misconceptions; water scarcity, mismanagement and pollution; and the steady loss of habitat. The proliferation of the internet has not helped matters, with exotic pet store owners and independent sellers trading endangered species on countless social media sites, websites, and even the dark web. Many species of turtles make for popular pets both within the country and internationally. Their shells and body parts are also smuggled for medicinal purposes, while their meat is considered a delicacy in several Asian countries.

In 2018, a wildlife trade monitoring network published its findings on the unbridled trafficking in the internationally protected black spotted turtle — found along the Indus River in Sindh and Punjab — through transit trade routes in Southeast Asia to Hong Kong and China. It revealed that a total of 10,321 alive black spotted turtles were seized in 53 operations between 2014 and 2016. This highlighted an alarming increase in the illicit trade of the unique, freshwater animal when compared to past records: between 2008 and 2014, a total of 2,171 turtles were rescued in 26 seizures. To combat the illegal wildlife trade, greater transnational cooperation is required, along with stricter enforcement of laws. Alongside, local communities must be given more stake in the conservation process, and steps taken to combat poverty and encourage alternative means of livelihood.

## **Acts of desperation**

ON Wednesday, Mir Hasan set himself on fire inside his home in Karachi. A few days before, his son had asked him for warm clothes to wear to school since an unusually cold winter spell has gripped the city. Unable to fulfil his son's simple request, and fed up of his poverty, the father of four took his own life in one of the most horrific ways imaginable. Incurring burns all over his body, he passed away on a hospital bed the following day. According to his family, the scrap dealer had been struggling to find employment for some time now. His tragic death once again highlights the psychological toll that desperate poverty takes on so many citizens of this country — around a third of the country's total population is estimated to live below the poverty line — but will it jolt our leaders to action? After all, this is not the first incident of its kind in the country. In 2018, a rickshaw

driver named Muhammad Khalid set himself on fire near a police station in Karachi to protest against traffic police extorting money from him on a near daily basis. A few months earlier, Shafi Muhammad set himself alight after being handed an electricity bill of over Rs150,000. And, in Islamabad in 2011, 35-year-old Raja Khan immolated himself in front of parliament. Sustaining 90pc burns on his body, the unemployed labourer from Sindh died inside a hospital, having left behind a letter beseeching the government to provide for his children. A similar letter addressed to Prime Minister Imran Khan is said to have been sent by Mir Hasan, requesting housing and employment.

Nine years ago, horror over a street vendor's self-immolation sparked an uprising that led to the ouster of a 24-year-long dictatorship in Tunisia, and ignited revolutionary fervour throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Despite so many similar examples in Pakistan, it is disturbing how deep the apathy and indifference to the pain of others runs in our society.

## **Traders vs FBR**

THE on-and-off talks between the traders and tax authorities have entered a crucial round, with the government having done its part to accommodate the former's wishes through a presidential ordinance issued in the last week of 2019. Now comes the moment when traders have to deliver on their commitment to bring more of their peers into the tax net, and to comply with the requirement to maintain identity records of all parties they buy from and sell to. The government has met their demands to adjust the ceiling on the turnover tax below which traders will not be required to pay, but those whose operations are above the required threshold must now step forward voluntarily. It must be noted, however, that the community has a notorious history of making commitments only to renege on them — and the manner in which they do so can be clever enough to leave the government with little to no option but to surrender in exasperation.

Such a situation was witnessed when the previous government tried to use a carrot-and-stick approach to win the traders over. The community had been offered an amnesty scheme specifically designed for them to bring undeclared assets into the tax net, coupled with punitive measures in the form a withholding tax on their banking transactions if they remain noncompliant with tax-filing requirements. At the time, their leadership agreed to work with the government to

persuade members of their own community to avail of the benefits of the offer but, despite numerous deadline extensions, only a negligible number of traders came forward. The government lost patience and slapped punitive withholding taxes on their bank transactions — and there ended the thrust for documentation of traders' incomes and transactions. Now, once again, the traders' leadership has promised to work with the government to bring members of their community into the net. This time, however, the mechanics of the operation are different. Large traders will be identified by the size of their shop floor, and committees with the representation of trader leaders will be formed in every city and town to help identify new declarants. This time round, there is hope that the government will be able to effect a breakthrough, because nobody can doubt the importance of documentation efforts. But it must remain vigilant, and be prepared if it appears that the community is simply playing for time yet again.

## **Time to declare a polio emergency**

IN a mere matter of months, years' worth of progress towards eradicating poliovirus in Pakistan has been reversed. With six new confirmations, the total tally of polio cases in 2019 now stands at 134 — a staggering increase of over 1,000pc compared to 12 cases the year before. Sheer negligence has resulted in the wild poliovirus type 1 — contained to just a few locations as recently as early 2018 — now spreading to a number of areas across the country. Meanwhile, the resurgence of the dangerous vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2, which had previously been eradicated, has been attributed to the accidental use of years-old vaccines which ought to have been destroyed. Pakistan featured heavily in a recent statement on the international spread of poliovirus by the Emergence Committee of the WHO's International Health Regulations, in which it recommended extending travel recommendations for another three months, given its assessment that the risk of international spread of the disease was the highest it has been since 2014. In its statement, the WHO also expressed an “urgent need to overhaul the leadership and strategy of the [polio eradication] programme in Pakistan”.

Indeed, for some time now, global bodies have been raising the alarm on Pakistan's pathetic polio response. The recent International Monitoring Board report categorically termed the country's polio-eradication efforts a “political football” and attributed their failure to a “lack of political unity”. It described the re-

emergence of the virus in areas declared polio-free at the outset of 2018 as “a massive reversal of the trajectory to global polio eradication”. This scathing indictment came despite Prime Minister Imran Khan’s frequent expressions of concern over the rise in polio cases and numerous pledges to eliminate the disease for good. It was also no less dissonant when, in December, public health and polio officials described anti-polio efforts to be “back on track” at the conclusion of what they claimed was a successful national immunisation drive. However, the five-day drive saw some grave managerial issues — including administering expired oral vaccines to scores of children in Rawalpindi, and failing to reach nearly 300,000 children in Sindh despite official claims of 100pc coverage in the province.

Clearly, Pakistan must learn from these catastrophic mistakes. To have come so close to eradicating eradication polio — in the face of terrorist attacks, disinformation campaigns and public mistrust — only to enable its horrific resurgence through little more than gross ineptitude is despicable. The government must arouse from its complacent slumber and declare a polio emergency, with the prime minister himself leading the campaign in order to stress how crucial this public health issue is. The future of countless children rests on how he tackles this national crisis.

## **Zainab Alert Bill**

ON Friday, the National Assembly passed the Zainab Alert, Recovery and Response Bill. While recognising the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution, lawmakers felt it necessary to create a new law for “missing and abducted children” given the “high risk of violence, exploitation, abuse, trafficking, rape or death”. Tabled by the Human Rights Ministry, the bill is named after Zainab Ansari, who was brutally raped and killed in Kasur three years ago. The child’s murder sparked protests across the country, demanding her killer be brought to justice. In 2015, the presence of a large, well-connected paedophile ring in the city made headlines after hundreds of videos depicting the sexual abuse of children surfaced. While the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is not something new in our society — or indeed, any society — it has come to the forefront of public discourse through greater frequency in reporting in recent years. In Pakistan, Kasur has remained at the centre of the storm. In 2018, the police arrested four people for purchasing minor girls for prostitution. In 2019,

protests erupted once again when the tortured bodies of three abducted boys were recovered. And just last week, the mother of a 12-year-old girl filed a complaint against her husband for allowing another man to sexually abuse the child for Rs500.

There are countless other examples which never make the headlines, and those that do are often quickly forgotten. If the bill is passed by the Senate, offenders will be handed life imprisonment, along with a fine of Rs1m, as maximum punishment. Additionally, a helpline for missing children will be established; a Child Protection Advisory Board set up; and action taken against police officials who delay investigations, as seen in the case of 10-year-old Farishta, when Islamabad police dismissed her family's cries to register an FIR for several days since she went missing. Since the bill only covers the Islamabad Capital Territory, it is of critical importance that the provinces now take up the issue.

## Quetta blast

BALUCHISTAN is, unfortunately, no stranger to violence, though various acts of terrorism perpetrated by a variety of militant actors in the province have dipped in frequency over the past few years. But as Friday evening's tragic bombing in a Quetta mosque has shown, the calm in Baluchistan is tenuous.

Unless the security forces continue to keep a keen eye on militants in the province, a return to the bad old days cannot be ruled out.

At least 15 people lost their lives in the blast, including senior police officer DSP Amanullah Ishaqzai; the tragedy for his family was compounded as he had recently lost a young son in an apparent targeted killing. This is the second major act of terrorism in Baluchistan over the past several days, as on Tuesday, Hizbul Ahrar, a proscribed offshoot of the TTP, claimed responsibility for a bombing that targeted a Frontier Corps vehicle in Quetta's Mecongi Road area. As for Friday's attack, the militant Islamic State group has claimed responsibility.

Though the motive of the mosque bombing is not yet clear — the targeting of a senior police officer is a possibility — other factors may also be involved.

For example, the violence could be a spillover of the struggle between two major Afghan militant actors, the Taliban and the local chapter of IS.

As reported in this paper, an investigator has said Friday's incident bore resemblances to the bombing in Kuchlak last year, in which a brother of Afghan Taliban chief Haibatullah was killed.

Both the Taliban and the IS Khorasan outfit are locked in a battle for influence within Afghanistan, and it would not be unusual for their sparring to cross into Pakistan, as both have ideological comrades on this side of the border.

In order to preserve the relatively peaceful atmosphere in Balochistan, better intelligence is needed to shield Pakistan from violence originating in Afghanistan.

Balochistan in the past has seen waves of bloodshed carried out by militants — the massacre of the province's Hazaras by Lashkar-i-Jhangvi should not be forgotten — while the Baloch separatist insurgency is also largely quiet at present.

Therefore, with the state saying that calm has been restored in the country, Balochistan cannot be allowed to slip back into chaos.

Solid intelligence-based operations are needed to trace out local facilitators of Afghan militant groups and neutralise them before they can use Pakistani soil as a battlefield in their proxy war.

## **CII's objections to NAB law**

WHEN the government overhauled the NAB law last month through a presidential ordinance, it could have scarcely foreseen objections to it from a more unexpected quarter. At a press conference on Thursday, the Council of Islamic Ideology Chairman Dr Qibla Ayaz said that the body had arrived at the conclusion that certain parts of the legislation were "not compatible with Islamic laws on crime and punishment". Among these is the section pertaining to presumption of guilt against an individual accused of accepting illegal gratification. According to the CII, the onus of proving innocence does not lie on the alleged perpetrator, and that keeping a suspect in custody for extended periods of time without a case violates religious principles. Further, handcuffing suspects and airing footage of the arrest on media is objectionable on similar grounds.

The presumption of innocence is part of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is critical to ensuring the right to due process which entails respecting the dignity of the accused and a trial held without undue delay so that he is not unnecessarily deprived of his liberty or subjected to the uncertainty that a protracted legal battle would entail. A few days ago, the Supreme Court, while hearing a bail application in a fraud case, asked NAB why it took suspects into custody before having found prosecutable evidence against them. On several occasions, senior officials of the accountability body have also made statements about ongoing proceedings and publicly humiliated individuals yet to be found guilty in a court of law. Some suspects have been produced in handcuffs before an accountability court.

These are serious violations of the universal principles of justice; and in a parliamentary democracy, it should not take the CII to point them out. The duty to protect the citizens' fundamental rights falls on the elected representatives of the people, and they have been remiss on this front. Now the government and the opposition have a chance to address the NAB law's shortcomings in their ongoing effort to forge a consensus on the legislation. The CII's observations also put the PTI government in an awkward position. The party has often passed the buck to the constitutional body when it comes to legislation on social issues such as domestic violence. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the PTI has been in power since 2013, still does not have a law on domestic violence, mainly because of CII's objections to the bill sent to it for consideration by the provincial government. Will the PTI now claim that the council should limit itself to social issues? That said, and notwithstanding CII's objections to the NAB law, there is no need for such a body in a parliamentary democracy when the Constitution already states that no law can be made against the Quran and Sunnah.

## **Punjab AIDS epidemic**

DISTURBING reports are emerging from Punjab where there has been a surge in HIV/AIDS cases owing to the alleged mismanagement of the provincial AIDS control programme, which is said to be on the verge of collapse. The number of registered AIDS patients in the province has risen to an alarming 18,556, comprising about 50pc of the total number of registered cases across the country — 36,900. Apparently, the provincial AIDS control programme has been marred by internal rifts for quite some time, as a result of which at least four key officials



resigned from their positions in November 2019. Meanwhile, the programme is said to have bungled the monitoring and screening of the top five at-risk population groups in the province — injecting drug users, transgender people, male and female sex workers, and truck and bus drivers — and misreported the total number of HIV/AIDS patients in the province. As if this was not enough, the Punjab government has also supposedly failed to obtain 100,000 rapid diagnostic kits used for screening of patients, increasing the chances of a looming HIV/AIDS epidemic in the province.

While the number of people living with HIV/AIDS is declining worldwide, in Pakistan, the figure seems to be steadily increasing. According to the 2019 UNAIDS report, HIV incidence per 1,000 people in Pakistan has risen from 0.08 in 2010 to 0.11 in 2018 — despite “massive funding” by foreign donors to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS — earning us a place among 11 countries in the world with the highest prevalence of the disease. Last year, Larkana district gained global notoriety after almost 900 people, out of whom more than 750 were children, tested positive for HIV/AIDS in the small town of Ratodero. These frequent outbreaks, however, are symptomatic of the larger malaise in the country’s healthcare and governance system, and thus reek of mismanagement and negligence by the authorities concerned. The Punjab Health Department needs to wake up and tackle this crisis head on before the damage becomes uncontrollable.

## **Four-day Tests**

THE International Cricket Council’s recent suggestion to reduce the traditional five-day Tests to four days has met with stiff resistance from players around the world, while purists have scoffed at the idea which they allege is being promoted for predominantly commercial reasons. The proposal will be discussed in the upcoming ICC meeting scheduled to take place in Dubai in March. Though a majority of the cricket boards have hitherto refrained from officially commenting on the proposal, Cricket Australia and the England and Wales Cricket Board have emerged as strong proponents of four-day Tests. In defence of their stance, they contend that a large number of Test matches played in recent years — especially those involving young cricketing nations such as Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and a few others — have been lop-sided contests that have ended within four days. Besides, other factors such as the ICC’s increasing

demand for event windows, the proliferation of T20 leagues, and the exorbitant costs of staging Test series are all said to have contributed to the proposal being put forward.

But while the ICC may have its own reasons to back four-day Tests, many former cricketers — including legendary figures like Javed Miandad, Sachin Tendulkar, Glenn McGrath, Ricky Ponting and Virat Kohli — have raised objections to the proposed idea and termed it ‘ridiculous’. They feel that Test cricket remains the game’s best format and correctly point out that it showcases a team’s true calibre, its resilience, patience and consistency over the course of the five-day period. Curtailing the Tests in any way, they insist, could deprive the format of its romance that has been the essence of the game for over 140 years. The truth is that the ICC, the game’s world governing body, has got its priorities mixed up here. Rather than advocating four-day Tests, it should concentrate on adopting measures to strengthen the weaker teams, ensure quality pitches around the world to promote competitive games and strictly bind powerful teams like India to fulfill their cricket commitments with Pakistan that could hugely boost Test matches as a financially viable format. There are, of course, other factors the ICC needs to look at. Inclement weather affecting a session or two in matches is a common occurrence in cricket while niggling injuries could render players temporarily inactive. The traditional five-day Test allows for these eventualities rather well and allows the teams a fair chance to compensate for them.

## **Vacant CEC post**

WHERE legislation regarding the appointment of the services chiefs was concerned, nearly all parties in parliament showed surprising alacrity to get the job done. However, another equally important matter seems to have not elicited the same zeal from our parliamentarians: the need to appoint a permanent chief election commissioner.

The Election Commission of Pakistan has been without a CEC since Sardar Mohammad Raza’s retirement in early December, although the Constitution mandates that when ECP positions fall vacant, they must be filled within 45 days.

The relevant parliamentary committee consisting of government and opposition members has failed to agree on a consensus candidate, while an acting CEC calls the shots.

In fact, the electoral watchdog is short of two other members besides the CEC: the vacancies were created after the retirement of members from Sindh and Balochistan, but have not been filled because of the acrimonious relationship between the government and the opposition.

This lethargy in managing the affairs of this key institution by lawmakers is confounding.

However, media reports indicate there has been some movement of late, with former prime minister and PPP leader Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, who is a member of the aforesaid parliamentary committee, saying that both sides will meet soon to break the deadlock.

The ECP plays a critical role in holding up the democratic edifice in the country by conducting and overseeing the electoral process. From local government polls to the general elections, the ECP needs to be in perfect working order for the democratic process to function smoothly. What is more, the CEC must be a non-polarising, non-controversial figure acceptable to all political players.

However, the attitude of parliamentarians up till now indicates they are not too bothered about this key national institution and its top office.

This is strange as the PTI, while on the opposition benches, regularly and stridently raised the issue of electoral reform, particularly the importance of making the ECP more independent and effective.

Opposition parties — most of which have raised doubts about the fairness of the 2018 polls — have shown a similarly lacklustre attitude where appointing the ECP members is concerned.

In October, the Islamabad High Court, while hearing a petition on the government's controversial attempt to unilaterally appoint the two provincial ECP members, had asked: "Can parliament not even solve such a small issue?"

The government and opposition must give the ECP the importance it deserves by appointing the CEC and provincial members without further delay.

As the case of the services chiefs' legislation shows, when the politicians put their minds to it, they can get the job done within record time.

## **PML-N's choice**

THE PML-N appears to have taken a strategic decision to abandon the path of confrontation with the establishment and opt for the reconciliation route.

There has been no formal announcement in this regard, but actions, and indeed silence, speak louder than words.

Read: Hard times about to be over, PML-N tells its workers

The fuzzy remarks of PML-N parliamentarians and the studious silence of the top party leadership were both commandeered in the service of the party's vote in favour of the bill on the extension of the services chiefs.

The open and unambiguous support for the bill took everyone — including the party rank and file — by surprise. Since then, the leadership has faced a deluge of criticism from its supporters and derision from its opponents.

Did the party miscalculate and make a mistake?

This may not necessarily be the case. For instance, a report in this paper, based on conversations with some PML-N leaders, says the strategic shift is a well-considered policy aimed at mending fences with the establishment in order to chart a path back to power.

The leadership has reportedly told party colleagues that the shift from resistance to reconciliation will reap rich political dividends for the PML-N and not result in much damage in the long run.

Politics, they say, is the art of the possible, and the PML-N may have thought that the long-term benefits of abandoning its resistance mode would far outweigh the short-term damage to its credibility.

This may be so, but it would be safer to say that Nawaz Sharif's attempt to mount an ideologically driven challenge to the establishment and reshape the ethos of his party has been all but abandoned. It will be difficult to unfurl the banner of resistance once again if things do not work out for the party as envisioned.

The charitable view is that the Sharifs are hardened political players and know the fabric of the system better than most of their opponents. Therefore, away from the rough and tumble of the Pakistani landscape, they have delved deep

into the causes of their troubles, weighed options and scenarios and concluded that salvation lies in the path of least resistance.

There could be various reasons for this logic. Perhaps the party is not cut out for defiance and is unable to sustain a prolonged confrontation; perhaps the timing of its erstwhile defiance was not right; or perhaps the leadership is unable to deliver on its slogan that demands 'respect for the vote'.

In all cases, Shahbaz Sharif's long-held view seems to have prevailed, and he is the man holding the steering wheel. The PML-N has made its choice. Every choice has consequences that carry risks and rewards.

The party leadership should now introduce an element of transparency in its strategic shift and explain to the voters how this change of tack is not for personal or family reasons but for a larger cause.

## **MQM convener's move**

THROUGHOUT its political history, the MQM has had a chequered record of both joining and leaving governments, in the centre as well as in Sindh. Once upon a time, these decisions would be announced in dramatic fashion, with the party's founder and now ex-supremo Altaf Hussain holding forth as the cameras rolled, letting the nation know who the party was ditching or propping up. Those times may be gone, but some habits die hard. The Muttahida's current chief Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui told the media on Sunday that he was quitting his post as federal IT and telecom minister, though adding that the MQM was not leaving the PTI-led coalition. The decision was taken due to apparently broken promises by the PTI, with Mr Siddiqui saying the federal government had done little for Karachi and the rest of urban Sindh — the Muttahida's traditional constituency. The centre was quick to act, with the prime minister himself reportedly saying that the MQM's reservations would be looked into, as a number of PTI cabinet members added that they would not let their Sindh-based ally go. On Monday, Planning Minister Asad Umar was in Bahadurabad, Karachi, where the MQM has temporarily set up shop after its Nine Zero headquarters were sealed by the establishment, to woo Khalid Maqbool. Though the meeting seemed to be cordial, there were no immediate sign that the Muttahida convener would take back his resignation from the cabinet.

Ever since emerging as an electoral force in the 1980s, the MQM has made itself useful to governments and, at the same time, relished its role as kingmaker despite its status as a middle-tier Sindh-based party. The MQM has indeed had a transactional relationship with its political partners, often ending the alliance if it felt it was not getting a good enough deal. As far as the coalition with the PTI is concerned, this again seems to have been a transactional arrangement, as there is very little linking the two parties ideologically. In fact, at one time the respective leaderships used toxic phraseology to describe each other. But in politics friends and enemies change quite swiftly, and the next few days (or hours?) will show whether the MQM follows up by going further and leaving the coalition. Regardless, it would gain either way, whether it is offered more ‘incentives’ by the PTI, or if takes up the PPP’s offer to join the Sindh government.

## Iran plane disaster

THE accidental shooting down of the Ukrainian passenger aircraft, and the aftermath of the incident, has exposed the weaknesses in Iran’s defence strategy. Together, international isolation and the domestic blowback have put the regime in a catch-22 situation. The tragic blunder that resulted in the death of 176 people on board has called into question the ability of Iran’s military and civilian leadership to tread with caution in a potentially explosive situation. Why aerospace commander Brig-Gen Ali Hajizadeh’s earlier request that the area be declared a no-fly zone had been rejected is puzzling. In times of such heightened tensions, the regime should have closed off Iranian airspace for commercial flights — many international airlines themselves had decided to avoid flying over the country. What is also of concern is that Iranian defences failed to distinguish between a hostile and commercial aircraft, or mistook the plane for a missile. The fact that the passenger aircraft had taken off from Tehran airport and was not coming from outside Iran’s borders should have been enough reason not to flag it as an immediate threat, especially when all of the country’s defence systems were on full alert, hours after Iran had struck two Iraqi bases housing American military personnel. The downing of the airliner has rightly caused alarm in the region at a time when the threat of war still looms.

Iran may have staved off greater international pressure by admitting its “unforgiveable mistake” but it appears as if the regime with its damaged credibility might have to make further concessions in the face of mass public

protests in the country. Iranians are justifiably infuriated at the incident that left a large number of Iranians and Iranian-Canadians, among others, dead — and at their leadership's initial effort to deflect the blame. Cracking down on the protesting public — that is also driven by domestic woes — is not going to help the regime. The focus must now be on a transparent inquiry and cooperation with international authorities, especially the affected countries, who want a thorough investigation.

## Winter deaths

THE death toll and the number of injured keep rising. As harsh winter conditions grip much of the country — particularly Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Balochistan, and parts of Punjab — the government has ordered immediate humanitarian assistance for the affected. And yesterday, Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a visit to patients at the CMH in Muzaffarabad, calling for relief efforts “on an emergency footing”. Over the past few days, the region has been ravaged by deadly avalanches and landslides that were triggered by unexpected rainfall, leading to the closure of several important routes in AJK and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. AJK has recorded the highest number of fatalities so far. It is followed by the resource-rich yet perennially poor province of Balochistan, which has been enveloped in a thick blanket of snow. With no let-up in the crisis, the total number of deaths has crossed 100. Meanwhile, the present state of gas shortage in the country has meant that many families cannot operate heaters and geysers inside their homes, and continue to remain at the mercy of the elements.

Experts consider such extreme winters to be yet another feature of the global warming crisis. Pakistan sits uncomfortably in the position of the fifth most vulnerable country to the effects of climate change — despite producing less than 1pc of the total greenhouse gas emissions. About a decade ago, the country was devastated by a series of floods which led to approximately 2,000 deaths, while millions of others were displaced from their homes. In more recent years, it has witnessed droughts in its southern parts, which have suffered from severe water shortages. The present government seems to understand the seriousness of the issue well. After all, in his first address to the nation as the newly elected prime minister in 2018, Prime Minister Khan listed the environment as part of his 11-point agenda. That same year, he launched his ambitious ‘10-billion-tree tsunami’ to counter climate change. And last year, in his address to the United

Nations General Assembly, he brought up the threat of climate change once again — this time on the global stage. Despite saying all the right things, however, it remains to be seen what large-scale measures are being taken on the ground to reverse the damage already done. Furthermore, if such extreme weather is to become the norm, there has to be better preparedness in order to avert future disasters.

When the world leaders came together to sign the Paris Agreement in 2015, it was decided that responsibility for climate change rested with all the countries. And yet, a handful of leaders of the world's most powerful nations continue to deny the reality of climate change, despite all the evidence around them, and insist on the old ways of doing business. History will not forgive them and climate-related tragedies will continue to strike.

## **Boot theatrics**

JUST when political observers thought that PTI maverick Faisal Vawda could not pull another rabbit out of his hat, he pulled out a boot instead. Then he placed it on the table, live on TV.

As if this weren't enough, he declared that the PML-N and PPP — whose representatives were sitting next to him in the studio — were licking this boot. The military-style boot stayed put on the table, as did Mr Vawda and the show host in the studio. The opposition guests, however, did not. They walked off the set in disgust. By his theatrics, Mr Vawda embarrassed the guests, the host, his party, politicians in general, the military and ordinary citizens. The only person he did not embarrass, apparently, was himself.

Mr Vawda is no stranger to controversy.

When he is not driving fast cars or riding big bikes, he is threatening to hang a few thousand people or promising more jobs than Pakistanis can handle.

He also likes to stuff a weapon in his belt, don a flak jacket and rush to the scene of a terror attack in case his services are required. Thankfully, so far that stage has not been reached. But a new line in the public display of political crudeness has certainly been crossed.



By placing the boot on the table, Mr Vawda not only ridiculed the institution of the military, he humiliated all political parties, including the one he expresses loyalty to. He may have intended to make fun of the opposition but ended up reinforcing perceptions about the PTI's own weak political credentials. His taunting was misplaced and mistimed.

It is true that the spirit of cooperation that moved bickering parties in parliament to sign into law the process of extending the tenure of military chiefs has been questioned — and justifiably so. But politicians can at least avail themselves of the momentum and work together on other public-oriented legislation.

The zero-sum attitude displayed by Mr Vawda, if allowed to run amok, will wreck all prospects of democracy's return to normal functioning.

Opposition leaders have rightly heaped criticism on Mr Vawda's crude theatrics. The PTI leadership should do the same.

Saner heads should have a quiet but firm word with Mr Vawda and explain to him how his attempts at cheap popularity are damaging political stability in the country.

Perhaps it is time Mr Vawda zipped up his embarrassing rhetoric, laced up his misplaced exuberance and tied up his oversized ego. The country would be all the better for it.

## **Bangladesh series**

THE Bangladesh cricket team's tour of Pakistan has finally been confirmed. This is a fabulous piece of news for Pakistan cricket — that celebrated the revival of Test cricket with a short series against Sri Lanka last month — and for the millions of home fans who had yearned for top-level international cricket to return to the country. The fate of the Bangladesh series hung in the balance for some time as the BCB had expressed its reservations about their team touring Pakistan for a longer period and had insisted upon playing three T20s instead of the two-Test series that was originally proposed by its Pakistani counterpart. However, all is well that ends well, and Bangladesh has now agreed to tour Pakistan in three phases. They will be playing three T20 games this month, a Test match in early February and another Test and an ODI in April after the Pakistan Super League is over. The agreement to this effect was reached during

a crucial meeting held in Dubai on Tuesday between PCB chairman Ehsan Mani and BCB president Nazmul Hasan. It is significant to note that the meeting was facilitated by the ICC chairman Shashank Manohar, which is a clear indication that the world cricket governing body is now convinced about the improved cricket-playing environment in Pakistan and has unequivocally put its weight behind the PCB to host foreign teams.

Besides, the incident-free Test series against Sri Lanka at home last month has buoyed the PCB's hopes and bolstered its confidence to negotiate home tours with fellow cricket boards from a position of strength. The good offices used in persuading the BCB to agree to the series and the PCB's unrelenting stance of ruling out the neutral venue option for the matches have also worked in this country's favour. Pakistan, in all likelihood, will have the upper hand in the two Tests against Bangladesh which may also substantially improve their position in the ongoing ICC Test Championship. So it is, indeed, a win-win situation for the hosts.

## **Real estate scams**

OVER the years, Karachi's precious real estate has become a happy hunting ground for unscrupulous builders, enabled by corrupt political bigwigs and a bureaucracy that acts as the latter's handmaiden.

Two more land scams are now in the spotlight.

On Wednesday, NAB informed an accountability court about the fraudulent manner in which land was allegedly acquired in the name of "shuhada" by certain builders and PAF officials for the Fazaia Housing Scheme in Karachi. Further, it said, of 8,400 units, only 30 were allotted to families of martyred air force personnel. The accused are believed to have collected Rs18.2bn under the heads of various fees, surcharges, etc — no doubt to be shared amongst all the players, those on the front line as well as in the power centres that ensure impunity for such crimes.

NAB has also filed a reference against Malik Riaz, the owner of Bahria Town, and several others — including politicians and bureaucrats — for illegal allotment of an amenity plot in Karachi's Clifton area on which a portion of the Icon Tower project is located.

It will be interesting to see how both cases unfold, given they involve individuals with connections in the 'right' places.

Bahria Town's land acquisition and development practices in multiple projects were declared illegal by the Supreme Court in May 2018. In March last year, the apex court accepted its offer to pay Rs460bn over seven years in land settlement charges for its massive housing scheme in Karachi.

However, it ordered NAB to refrain from filing references against those involved in that scam of unprecedented proportions: the reference in the Icon Tower case — said to be a Rs100bn scam — is the first such action against Mr Riaz.

Among the flagrant illegalities in the free-for-all that characterises the dealing in Sindh government land is the handing over of amenity plots to private developers for commercial/residential use.

In other words, the people's right to civic facilities has been sold down the river by officialdom for its own pecuniary benefit.

Certainly, there is a dire need for housing in the mega city of Karachi, but it can be met lawfully — except that would level the playing field, and cut into the eye-watering profits enjoyed by the land mafia.

Aside from the illegality itself, using the pretext of providing for the families of war heroes in order to amass personal fortunes is a cynical ploy that deserves to be roundly condemned, not least because it dishonours the sacrifice of those who have fallen in the line of duty. The individuals behind the Fazaia scheme are not the first to have taken this route.

At the losing end of these shenanigans is the unsuspecting public. Until exemplary punishment is meted out to those involved, the people in their legitimate quest for a long-term asset, and a house to call their own, will continue to suffer.

## **Admin-police tussle**

IN what is becoming an ugly, recurring tug of war in Sindh's administrative landscape, the provincial government has sent the Sindh police chief packing for his 'failure' to improve law and order. The provincial cabinet announced this on

Wednesday, and a day later the Sindh administration wrote to the centre to repatriate Kaleem Imam as his services were no longer required. The Sindh government was of the view that Mr Imam had failed to perform and, therefore, he was being shipped out. However, there is more to this than meets the eye; in December, Kaleem Imam had written to the chief secretary, complaining that two officers had apparently been transferred without his approval, which was “affecting police working”. Those familiar with Sindh’s politics felt that it was only a matter of time before this confrontation came out into the open. Sure enough, the IGP’s marching orders now confirm the fact that the PPP-led Sindh government is no longer interested in Mr Imam’s services. The PTI, which sits on the opposition benches in the Sindh Assembly, says it will go to court over the move, with the prime minister reportedly calling the provincial governor over the matter.

The tussle between the administration and police officers is not just limited to Sindh. For example, Punjab has also seen police chiefs changed in quick succession over the past couple of years. Moreover, the resignation of former KP IG Nasir Durrani from the police reforms commission, reportedly over the removal of the then Punjab IG, was also reflective of a wide gulf of mistrust between the administration and senior officers. The fact is that if the centre and the provinces are serious about police reforms, political interference must be eliminated, and officers must be allowed to complete their tenure and have a free hand where running the force is concerned. While provincial governments are known for meddling in the affairs of the police, the centre must also refrain from issuing viceregal edicts — especially in the aftermath of devolution — when it comes to police matters. If there is solid evidence of misconduct against an officer, then a proper inquiry as per the SOPs must be initiated. Simply shipping out an unwanted officer indicates that the political bosses are not happy with said individual. Despite the politicians’ resolve to change the dreaded thana culture, there has been little improvement in the force’s performance, much of it due to political meddling.

## **Pemra’s foolish action**

PEMRA’S knee-jerk reaction to ARY host Kashif Abbasi’s show on Wednesday night was yet another example of the electronic media regulator’s misplaced assertion of authority.

It had initially banned the show for 60 days but better sense seemed to have prevailed last night when Mr Abbasi was allowed to continue as usual. In an angry response to PTI minister Faisal Vawda, who had crossed all bounds of decency during Mr Abbasi's show, Pemra declared that Mr Vawda, "performed [a] very unethical act" and his arguments were "not only extremely frivolous and derogatory but also an attempt to debase a state institution".

On the other hand, the host of the show, the notice charged, "was quite unprofessional who actually did not intervene ... rather took the entire incident casually and kept smiling/cherishing such occurrence". Although the immediate danger may have passed, Pemra should refrain from endangering the constitutionally protected right of freedom of speech in future. It should not be allowed to ban journalists for "smiling/cherishing occurrence".

Much worse has been aired on TV channels without Pemra batting an eyelid. People have been spewing hate speech laced with racism and misogyny and have resorted to rabid character assassination but that somehow escapes the watchful eye of Pemra's content monitors.

A TV host was, however, summarily banned because he did not stop a minister from ridiculing institutions.

Something is clearly amiss.

This may have to do with the regulator failing to act independently, and not upholding the standards of professionalism or appreciating freedom of speech. This is why all too often Pemra wades into a controversy of its own making and then has to beat an embarrassing retreat.

Last year, it issued a notice banning anchors from going to other shows and then was forced to take it back when it was scolded by the Islamabad High Court. The authority would be well-advised to reconsider its ham-handed approach because it does not stand up to scrutiny.

The regulator should think twice before issuing such notices in the future.

## Water shortages

THE Senate standing committee that was informed about water being ‘unutilised’ downstream of Kotri should disregard these words, and focus, instead, on getting Federal Minister for Water Resources Faisal Vawda to answer its summons. During a hearing, the standing committee on water was told by the Member Punjab of the Indus River System Authority, Rao Irshad Ali Khan, that water worth \$29bn flows downstream Kotri Barrage into the sea ‘unutilised’ every year. Mr Khan urged the construction of more dams for water storage so that this water could be utilised for irrigation purposes. His argument, as well as the calculation he presented, is entirely flawed and should be ignored. The more important observation during the hearing was made by the committee’s chair, when he noted that the water minister seemed to have plenty of time for making himself and his government appear absurd thanks to his controversial stunts on TV talk shows, but had no time to appear before parliament, which is his constitutionally mandated duty.

It must be emphasised again and again that dams are not the solution to Pakistan’s growing water challenges. Pakistan’s per capita availability of water is only slightly above 1,000 cubic metres per annum, which is considered the threshold below which a country can be defined as ‘water scarce’. Water withdrawals from the country’s river system and groundwater reservoirs are staggeringly high by any standards. The United Nations has estimated that 74pc of the country’s renewable water supply is withdrawn, whereas a value of 25pc is considered high stress. The same percentage in Iran is 67pc, India 40pc, Afghanistan 31pc and China 19.5pc. Clearly, Pakistan is squandering its water resources, and an increased amount of water withdrawal from the system will only aggravate the problem, not solve it. In December 2019, the World Meteorological Organisation noted that a new tool to estimate the likelihood of conflict due to water scarcity showed Pakistan to be at “significant risk” of experiencing water-related conflict in some parts within the next 12 months.

Time and again, those who have taken a close look at Pakistan’s water economy have said the problem is not lack of storage, but the wasteful utilisation of this precious resource. The existing irrigation system collects less than a quarter of its operation and maintenance cost from water charges (abiana), with the rest having to come from government resources. The lack of proper pricing is at the

heart of the water economy's dysfunction. But for water pricing to work, a proper system of measurement across the irrigation system down to the farm is required. The Senate committee ordered such a telemetry system to be installed. The Irsa bureaucracy needs to focus its attention on these solutions rather than constantly ask for more dams. And the senators should brush aside any demands for more water withdrawal infrastructure, and insist on sound measurements as a start.

## **SCO invitation**

WHERE bilateral efforts to improve relations fail in the Pakistan-India context, multilateral forums can offer a 'safe' space for dialogue to pursue peace.

In this perspective, the prospect of Pakistan's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit to be held in India later this year has brought up the possibility of forward movement where the currently frozen bilateral ties between the two countries are concerned.

Read: After UNSC prod, India to invite Imran to SCO moot

As reported, when asked whether the prime minister of this country would be invited to the SCO moot, an Indian external affairs ministry spokesman told the media that "all eight countries and four observers will be invited", indicating in a rather lukewarm tone that Pakistan would be asked to participate.

Pakistan and India became full members of the SCO in 2017; the grouping — under the stewardship of Russia and China — brings together the Central Asian states as well as observers such as Iran and Afghanistan.

Though no miracles should be expected (the moribund status of Saarc is before us), were the prime minister to participate and interact with his Indian counterpart, perhaps the ice between Islamabad and New Delhi could be broken.

However, there should be no illusions; unless the core issues affecting the Pakistan-India relationship are addressed, a mere photo op between the two leaders will be of little use.

The Indian lockdown of Kashmir must top the agenda, as New Delhi should realise that its siege of the held region is destroying all chances of peace in the

subcontinent. Further, Pakistan has valid concerns about the Islamophobic laws India has introduced to disenfranchise millions of its Muslim citizens. And the recent bellicose, anti-Pakistan statements by Indian generals have further poisoned the atmosphere. If there is to be peace, such jingoism must be reined in.

That said, the fact is that the only viable option for Pakistan and India to pursue is constructive dialogue that paves the way for peace. Irresponsible war talk and chest-thumping only serve shrill anti-peace lobbies; the people of the subcontinent deserve prosperity and friendship.

Let India extend a proper invitation to Pakistan with respect. Thereafter, the prime minister should take up the opportunity and try to take matters forward.

Pakistan has over the past few years taken several steps for peace, yet the response from the other side has been less than enthusiastic. The SCO summit can prove to be a chance to change things for the better.

## **Outrage in 60 seconds**

THE political storm in a teacup surrounding TikTok celebrities Hareem Shah and Sandal Khattak continues to rage on. On Wednesday, the Senate Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunication urged the FIA to treat the actions of the two social media celebrities as cybercrimes, eg violations of privacy, defamation or blackmail. The following day, Ms Khattak filed a petition in a sessions court stating that the FIA had targeted her for harassment by repeatedly issuing her summons without disclosing the grounds for its inquiry. Given that the duo's high jinks remain a source of embarrassment for many a male politician, it is unlikely that this matter will soon die down. And while no citizen should be allowed to break laws for the sake of making viral content, it is concerning that virtually all talk of assigning blame and responsibility is focused only on these two young women.

The outrage and noise surrounding this scandal has obscured the need for more serious issues such as lapses of security to be addressed. As for lapses of judgement, while politicians like other public figures have a right to privacy, their personal conduct must not give rise to allegations of misuse of the powers of their public office. Some introspection on how they may have themselves



muddied the waters by often dragging opponents' personal affairs into the public domain would also not be unwelcome. Sections of the mainstream press, too, are not above reproach for subjecting the TikTok duo to vicious chastisement — often laced with misogyny and classism — and personal risk by disclosing private information. Moreover, the irony of labelling the two women 'attention seekers' while actively participating in the machinery of tabloid spectacle is not lost on anyone. Lastly, it is an interesting reflection on our national priorities that public discourse surrounding TikTok has more to do with moral panic than potential issues concerning users' data collection, manipulation of public opinion, and amplification of hate speech, disinformation and harassment campaigns endemic on all social media platforms.

## **Hot money**

CONCERNS are increasing among some sections of the business community that the large amounts of foreign investment flowing into local currency government debt securities could tie the State Bank into high interest rates for a longer period, because if rates were to be reduced, this money would run for the exit. Additionally, the foreign investors parking their funds in Pakistan government treasury bills are betting that for the duration that their money is there, an exchange rate depreciation will not take place. Exchange rate movement is one of the key risks faced by all foreign investors, whether in financial instruments or fixed investment, and given the sum of \$2.225bn that has come into treasury bills this fiscal year, exchange rate depreciation would wipe out a significant chunk of the profits that have been made.

For the most part, these fears are overstated. This is the first time Pakistan's local currency debt instruments have seen such large foreign participation and the phenomenon is new to most people. As a result, some misunderstandings have also been created. For one, some erroneously believe that foreign investors are getting a return of more than 13pc on their dollar-based investment. The truth is that this is the rupee-based return since the investment is in rupee-based instruments. The dollar equivalent would be much lower. More importantly, others have warned about the danger of 'hot money' being fickle and tied to small movements in interest rates. This is a more important concern to bear in mind, especially given that at least some of these inflows are from what the financial services industry calls 'carry traders', meaning investors who borrow in one

country where interest rates are lower and lend to another where the rates are higher, earning themselves a tight spread in between.

The problem for the State Bank now is the perceptions that are coming up around these inflows. The market is expecting an interest cut between now and March. The banks seem to have other ideas though. The last T-bill auction saw massive participation of more than Rs1.1tr in bids when the target was Rs400bn. However, more than 60pc of all bids were in three-month tenors, meaning the banks are not pricing in an expectation of rate cuts in the few months ahead. Now if the State Bank does not cut rates by March, it could face a mounting chorus of voices saying that the country's monetary policy has been mortgaged to foreign investors in the government's hasty search for foreign exchange. This will become more problematic if in the months ahead there is growing recourse to this form of borrowing, which is a possibility. If this trend gathers pace, it could eventually serve as a drag on the economy. Perhaps both the pessimism and optimism around this phenomenon should be curtailed at this point.

## **Crisis time for PTI**

TROUBLE seems to be brewing within the ruling coalition. First the political allies of the government began to grumble. Then PTI members started voicing their own grievances. Soon an MQM minister, Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, resigned from the federal cabinet. A few days later, PML-Q minister Tariq Bashir Cheema opted out of a federal cabinet meeting. Before long, the PTI's own minister Fawad Chaudhry fired off a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan complaining about the manner in which the Punjab government was being run by Chief Minister Usman Buzdar. Suddenly, it seemed the ruling coalition was on the verge of splintering. Initially, the government did not take matters seriously, but once the fissures started appearing in public, Mr Khan launched a damage-control exercise. PTI delegations led by Federal Minister Asad Umar and Mr Khan's close aide Jahangir Tareen started calling on allies from the PML-Q, MQM, GDA and the BNP-M to hear their grievances and find an amicable solution. Recently, a PTI delegation held talks with the MQM in Karachi but was unable to convince Mr Siddiqui to take back his resignation. Not only do these hurried moves signal panic within PTI ranks, they have also revived concerns that the consensus around Mr Khan's government may be loosening. These concerns have increased with ministers such as Mr Chaudhry becoming very vocal in their

criticism of the government. It is only with the support of its allies that the PTI has been able to form governments at the centre and in Punjab. The numbers game in Islamabad and Lahore paints a precarious picture for the PTI, and if its allies abandon their support, both PTI setups could face an existential crisis.

So what has triggered this sudden crisis? Tension between political allies is a fairly common phenomenon but in Pakistan ruling parties have had enough resources to negotiate their way through such times. The surprising aspect this time, however, is why three key government allies — the MQM, PML-Q and the GDA — have chosen to air their grievances almost simultaneously. The timing of this crisis has triggered speculation that the allies' unhappiness may be coordinated to exert maximum pressure on the PTI. This pressure is felt most by the Punjab government. Calls for Mr Buzdar's ouster have been steadily growing but the prime minister has refused to replace him. Will Mr Khan be forced to make compromises in order to find a way out of this crisis? That will depend on who blinks first.

## **Pakistan Super League**

ALREADY excitement levels are soaring as the Pakistan Super League cricket carnival prepares to launch its fifth season a month from now. Six star-studded teams — the Multan Sultans, Karachi Kings, Islamabad United, Lahore Qalandars, Quetta Gladiators and the Peshawar Zalmi — will be competing for supremacy, with the bumper winner's purse in excess of a quarter of a million dollars. The icing on the cake this time round, however, is that the entire PSL will be staged in Pakistan for the first time ever since the event's inception in 2016. The league will see all its 34 matches played in four Pakistani cities including Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan, culminating in a grand finale in Lahore on March 22. The relocation move from the UAE, for which the PCB and the government deserve much credit, will hopefully further enhance Pakistan's status as a safe country following the return of Test cricket to home soil after almost a decade. The fact that the PSL has evolved into a global event is evident in what observers predict — that the viewership may well cross 70m this season. Indeed, with every season, the league has become bigger and better, attracting leading players from Pakistan, the West Indies, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, England, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and other nations, besides drawing top sponsors, broadcasters and, most importantly, fans.

However, the PSL has had its share of controversies; it must guard against them and make the event incident-free this time. The nasty 'fixing' scam in 2017 involving four players jolted the league. The PCB needs to have stringent measures in place in order to avert similar mishaps. It should also ensure that all foreign players feature in the games. Their abrupt pullout last year from matches in Pakistan because of security fears came as a huge disappointment to local fans and sent the wrong message to the international cricketing community. Hopefully, a successful PSL will help allay fears and give everyone much to celebrate amid competitive contests.

## **US-Taliban deal**

THERE appears to be some movement in the on-again, off-again Afghan peace process, as the Americans are currently talking to the Afghan Taliban in Doha; meanwhile, there are reports that the insurgents have agreed to reduce the level of hostilities against the US forces. In fact, a longer-lasting peace deal may also be in the works, ready to be signed by the end of this month. As there have been several false dawns on this front in the past, the news should be greeted with guarded optimism since both sides — the Taliban and the Trump administration — are known to be impulsive and unpredictable. For example, the Afghan militia have in the past stepped up attacks even as they sued for peace, while President Donald Trump ripped up a deal last year as preparations were under way to invite the Taliban to the US to sign it. However, such ups and downs are to be expected, and the tortured Afghan saga, which has been continuing for decades, cannot be untangled in days or weeks.

The days ahead will show if the Taliban make good on their promise to reduce acts of violence, and whether or not the Americans decide to go ahead and ink a more permanent peace deal. However, it should be noted that leaving out the Kabul government from any permanent Afghan settlement is not a good idea. The Taliban have said they may initiate an intra-Afghan dialogue which could include the Ashraf Ghani-led dispensation after a ceasefire has been signed with the Americans. This appears to be a softening in the militia's tone, as previously the Taliban have used uncharitable terms for the Kabul government, describing the setup as puppets of the Americans. The fact is that all sides in this brutal conflict — the Taliban, the Kabul government, other Afghan factions, the Americans and their foreign cohorts — are visibly fatigued after decades of war.

And most importantly, the Afghan people have witnessed enough death and destruction as global powers and their own compatriots have fought bloody battles in their forsaken land, taking a heavy toll on the country and its population. There seems to be a feeling on all sides that enough is enough. Meanwhile, even more vicious actors, such as the local chapter of the militant Islamic State group, are waiting in the wings to take advantage of the chaos and establish themselves in Afghanistan's ungoverned spaces.

For peace to succeed, all Afghan factions, as well as the government and foreign forces, must pledge to end the hostilities. If such confidence-building measures succeed, a grand Afghan reconciliation process should be initiated, so that all legitimate political players can come together and forge a peaceful path for their country. All of Afghanistan's neighbours, as well as world powers, must support such a process as insecurity within the country will spell insecurity in the whole region.

## **Senate furore**

TO denounce 'honour killings' while at the same time defending the concepts in which they are rooted, is perverse, illogical and dangerous. But that is precisely what Senator Mohsin Aziz tried to do on Friday during a discussion on the annual report of the National Commission on Women when he said that "honour killings are a problem", but honour and culture are important too. In other words, he proved himself an apologist for this vile practice. Senator Aziz went on to condemn the NGOs behind last year's Aurat March — an event that has aroused much moral panic for its display of women's refusal to abide by their 'prescribed' role and conform to society's double standards. In fact, the senator disparaged the entire women's rights movement in the country as being led by an elite class that in any case already enjoyed the rights they were supposedly agitating for. Fortunately, Senator Aziz's reprehensible words met with a fiery response from the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Sherry Rehman, who denounced the view that cultural norms justify the oppression of women in any form. The upper house, she said, must adopt a bipartisan approach to unequivocally condemn the practice of honour killing. Senator Rehman also paid fulsome tribute to the women's rights activists who, she pointed out, fought not for themselves but for those who did not have a voice to defend themselves against gender-based violence.

In a patriarchal society, culture is a convenient catch-all to justify keeping women confined to a limited, stereotypical role. Most distressing of all, the notion of honour within that cultural landscape demands that women pay the price with their lives so that men can ‘avenge’ any perceived ‘dishonour’ to the family name. This category of murder — often even resorted to as a ruse for achieving worldly objectives — is a tragic reality. In terms of legislation to protect women from regressive social mores and ensure their rights as equal citizens, Pakistan has come a long way, including enacting a law to deal specifically with honour killings. However, as Friday’s exchange illustrates, there is still much ground to cover where cultural attitudes are concerned. Progressive elements must continue to push back firmly. The prospect of female agency and autonomy, particularly with respect to the right to choose a life partner, threatens to upend the existing patriarchal norms of society. And patriarchy does not give up its privileges easily.

## **Harsh sentences**

THE other day, an anti-terrorism court sentenced 86 TLP workers to 55 years in prison, along with the imposition of a hefty fine and the seizure of their assets. Following disruptive protests that erupted across the country after the release in 2018 of Asiya Bibi — a Christian woman who had spent a decade behind bars on false blasphemy charges — a number of demonstrators affiliated with the party were taken into custody, including the brother and nephew of TLP chairman Khadim Hussain Rizvi. They have now been convicted under several counts. These include: obstructing a public servant from discharging his duties; disobeying legal orders; attempted murder; assaulting public servants; criminal trespassing; and damaging public property. Should those who were found guilty of these charges be punished? Yes, they should be, but surely the punishment must be in proportion to the crime. That is only fair. As it stands, the rulings of the anti-terrorism court are far too harsh — and, on another note, they may also create sympathy for an admittedly intolerant outfit. Moreover, it is unlikely that all 86 convicts, or even a majority of them, attempted to commit murder, the most serious of the crimes listed in the charge sheet. Glaringly, there were no charges against the party activists for making incendiary speeches, something many politicians — encouraged by violent protests — have indulged in throughout the years. It almost seems as if the protesters are being punished for something else.

Resultantly, the verdict brings into question the rationale behind the perpetuation of justice systems, notably in the form of anti-terrorism courts, which deny the accused bail, and usually extend the harshest of punishments. The previous chief justice rightly questioned the broad use of 'terrorism' to prosecute a wide range of crimes. In the past, there have been instances of cybercrime and theft being prosecuted under the anti-terrorism laws. Justice must remain impartial and not be swayed by popular demands of quick and overly severe punishment being administered to convicts.

## **Wheat flour crisis**

THE current crisis had been in the making for quite some time. Wheat flour shortages were looming large as the gaps appeared obvious. There were clear signs that warned of disruptions to supply in several parts of the country; once the projections proved correct, the increase in the price of wheat flour was inevitable.

Yet, the authorities concerned remained silent, showing little inclination to take steps to protect the consumers from the rising cost of the staple food. Reports of growing shortages in major cities were dismissed nonchalantly by the very people who were supposed to take action to remedy the situation. No surprise then that a full-blown crisis has gripped the entire country.

The government woke up at the prodding of the media which showed images of people queuing up outside shops to buy wheat flour at exorbitant rates. Since then, we've been told that wheat in large quantities was being released from the federal stocks and urgently dispatched to Sindh, KP and Balochistan — the areas that officials say face an acute shortage. The Economic Coordination Committee has also allowed the import of 0.3m tonnes of grain by the end of March to cover the shortages and manage market sentiments until the next harvest.

A debate has ensued on the reasons that might have led to the crisis. The government and the opposition blame each other, while the consumers continue to suffer as a consequence of poor governance. In fact, no single factor or actor can be blamed entirely for the crisis, which originated in Sindh and spilled over to the rest of the country.

The Sindh government didn't procure wheat during the last harvest. It says it did not lift wheat stocks because of a cash crunch resulting from the centre's failure to release funds. But that is not quite the explanation to satisfy an earnest inquiry.

Similarly, Punjab needs to come up with plausible reasons for its own inaction against the hoarders said to be responsible for hiking grain prices in the market. The abrupt restrictions it imposed on the inter-provincial movement of wheat and its products had also halted supply to KP and elsewhere.

Above all, the federal government cannot absolve itself of blame. Its decision to allow excessive wheat exports in summer despite the lower-than-targeted harvest has forced it to import wheat to cover the shortages for the next two months.

Unchecked smuggling of wheat flour across the porous borders with Afghanistan, and major supply disruptions caused by weather conditions and a strike by goods' transporters played their part in complicating matters. More importantly, it is poor management and lack of coordination among different tiers of government that led the crisis to overwhelm the poor to low-income population groups, who are already struggling to cope with the rising cost of food. It is they who are suffering the consequences of the rulers' indifference.

## **Prisoners' health**

LAST month, the Islamabad High Court constituted a commission to look into human rights abuses within prisons, particularly with regard to inmates' health issues. The commission has now published its findings in a report, and the situation seems to be even worse than previously thought, though perhaps it is not too much of a surprise to those who have been advocating for prisoners' rights for some time now. According to its investigation, the commission found that over 5,000 out of a total of 73,661 prisoners suffered from some form of disease: 2,100 inmates suffered from physical ailments, while nearly 2,400 were infected with contagious diseases such as HIV, hepatitis and tuberculosis. Additionally, it found a host of mental illnesses festering within prison confines and around 600 prisoners were said to be suffering from psychological disorders. Equally worrying, nearly half of the medical jail staff seats remained empty, along with a shortage of appropriate medical equipment and laboratories.



Under the Prison Rules and the Code of Criminal Procedure, prisoners are entitled to compulsory medical examination; release upon old age or illness; and transfer to hospitals in case of serious illness. All these health issues and discrepancies are linked to one overarching malaise in the criminal justice system: overcrowded prison conditions, which are the result of over-incarceration caused largely by delays in trial. In other words, prisons are packed beyond their capacities. Last year, a report to the Supreme Court found that there were a total of 77,275 prisoners held in 114 prisons across the country, which only had the capacity to house 57,742 people. In Punjab, 47,077 prisoners languished in 42 jails with the capacity to hold 32,477 people. And in Sindh, 17,239 prisoners were crammed into 24 prisons, against a sanctioned capacity of 13,038 people. The more recent statistics provided in the report vary somewhat, but once again underscore the problem of overcrowding, while confirming that the majority of prisoners are undertrials and often forced to share space with serious offenders. In Punjab, 55pc of all prisoners are undertrials; in Balochistan, this figure rises slightly to 59pc; and in Sindh and KP, a massive 70pc and 71pc of all prisoners have yet to be declared guilty. The government must start creating more prisons, detention and juvenile centres, but the law-enforcement and judicial systems have to consider their part in the problem as well and attempt to correct their failings.

## **Winter sports**

THIS year, Pakistan was represented at the Youth Olympic Games 2020 in Lausanne, Switzerland by 16-year-old Swiss-Pakistani Mia Nuriah Freudweiler, an alpine skier in the slalom and giant slalom events. During an interview, the young skier expressed a wish to promote winter sports and human rights in Pakistan by encouraging young girls to pursue their dreams of becoming athletes. She also indicated her own interest in becoming an instructor and teaching young girls in Pakistan how to ski in order to prepare them for national and international competitions. It is commendable that the young athlete from Switzerland aspires to work towards promoting skiing and encouraging women to take up the sport in Pakistan, the birth country of her mother Tania. There is a lot of untapped potential for winter sports tourism in the country and teaching skiing to young girls will no doubt help more women take up winter sports professionally while also boosting the provincial and district governments' overall efforts to promote winter tourism.

For several years now, international skiing competitions have been organised in the scenic Naltar valley in Gilgit-Baltistan and the Malam Jabba resort in Swat valley. For the past couple of years, the Ghizer valley and Altit area of Hunza valley have also witnessed winter sporting events, thanks to a few local organisations. In fact, there has been enthusiastic participation by local residents including young women. However, the lack of adequate resources, infrastructure, training institutes and sporting equipment — combined with a still uncertain security situation in those areas — pose serious hurdles for the country to establish itself as a leading destination for winter sports enthusiasts. Hopefully, the two winter sports schools, one in Madaklasht (Chitral) and the other in Malam Jabba, inaugurated by the Winter Sports Federation Pakistan last year will bridge this gap by enabling more male and female athletes to pursue their professional ambitions and train for international competitions. Perhaps Ms Freudweiler could also be approached for beginning her coaching career from one of these institutions.

## **Pleading for revenue**

THE prime minister's recent meeting with business leaders and chamber presidents featured some of his old rhetoric all over again, despite the passage of a year and a half in power. He asked them to pay their taxes, and reminded them that his government had slashed the personal expenses of Prime Minister House, and that the 'lavish lifestyles' of his predecessors were no longer a burden on the government exchequer. He also told them that his government would spend tax money on the Ehsaas programme for the poor, after coming up with whatever was required for defence and debt servicing. The audience, which consisted in significant measure of members of the business community connected with trading, seemed largely unmoved by the presentation.

The prime minister's rhetoric is ineffectual for a variety of reasons. For one, his personal expenses are not really a factor in people's decision to file, or not file, their returns, or get their enterprises registered with the tax authorities. Those expenses are miniscule, and besides, the prime minister's claim that he has slashed them does not hold up to scrutiny. For another, spending on Ehsaas, which basically carries forward the work that began with the Benazir Income Support Programme, is also not likely to motivate people to get their businesses registered. Broadening the tax base is a policy matter and it is not going to

happen via emotional appeals. Mr Khan tried this approach all through the first months of his coming to power. By now, it should be obvious to him that begging, pleading, cajoling and demanding that people comply with the laws only signal a weakness. What is needed is a schedule of incentives and disincentives that is designed in a way to get people to step forward and get their businesses registered.

Finding that schedule of incentives has been a policy conundrum for rulers in Pakistan for almost two decades now. We have tried force as well as registration requirements and made aggressive use of withholding agents embedded in the supply chains that span the trading economy. The previous government experimented with a novel carrot-and-stick approach for traders only, slapping penalties on their bank transactions if they were unregistered, while offering them an amnesty scheme if they chose to come into the net. All of these came to nought. Now the government has to demonstrate its seriousness of purpose in its endeavour, and realise that emotional appeals will not achieve anything. The government has already accommodated all the traders' demands in an ordinance released in the final days of 2019, and now the time has come for it to demand that the trader community live up to its end of the bargain. What will be the cost of failure on this front? Both the government and the trader community should know this clearly.

## **Middle East tumult**

FOR nearly a century, ever since the colonial powers firmly established themselves in the Middle East and divided up the pieces of the Ottoman Empire, the region has failed to witness long-term stability. The region — largely due to its geopolitical importance as an energy powerhouse — continues to see instability, with irresponsible external powers fuelling chaos, and incapable local elites unable to handle the demands of their people. In the Levant, Lebanon is on the boil. Protesters are livid at the Lebanese ruling class, while a severe economic crisis threatens the already fragile financial health of the Mediterranean state. In Iraq, people are back on the streets, demanding reform and better governance; ever since the 2003 US invasion, there has been no stable government in that country, while living standards in one of the world's leading oil producers are abysmal. As for Iran, it has been shaken by the assassination of Gen Qassem Soleimani by the US, with Tehran threatening to leave the NPT if

the EU goes to the UN to report Iran's perceived non-compliance with the nuclear deal. The crisis was sparked when President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of the multilateral deal. The ayatollahs see no reason to comply as they are not getting any benefits from the nuclear deal; instead, the Americans have further tightened sanctions, practically choking the Iranian economy. Meanwhile, Yemen continues to suffer episodes of violence; a recent Houthi missile strike at a government base reportedly killed over 100 loyalist troops.

Though disparate, there is a common thread running through these crises: much of the present chaos in the Middle East is fuelled by the confrontation between two rival axes — the pro-US camp, consisting of Israel and the Arab sheikhdoms, and Iran and its regional allies on the other side. In the long term, for peace to prevail, the US must review its aggressive posture and withdraw its military presence from the region. Instead of flexing its military muscle, let Washington deal with regional states in a spirit of friendship and cooperation. As for Iran and its Arab nemeses, both sides need to resolve their differences at the negotiating table and learn to live with each other, without America interfering. Major Muslim states including Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan can play a leading role in bringing the two sides together for a more peaceful and stable Middle East.

## **Rights activist's detention**

IT is inexplicable how the state appears discomfited by human rights activists. After all, they ask for nothing more than what the Constitution guarantees — rights to security of person, due process, freedom of speech, etc. So what can explain the humiliating treatment meted out to human rights activist Jalila Haider at the Lahore airport on Monday?

Ms Haider was travelling to the UK to participate in a women's coalition conference when she was detained for seven hours by the FIA who told her she had to wait for some individuals who "were coming with documents on" her. That visit never materialised — possibly because the negative publicity prompted a rethink. Her travel documents were then returned to her, with permission to board the next flight to her intended destination.

Ms Haider is the first female lawyer from Balochistan's Hazara community, a Shia ethnic group which has suffered horrendous levels of sectarian violence over the years.

The courageous and outspoken young advocate, who works for the rights of vulnerable women and children, came to public attention when she went on a hunger strike in 2018 to protest against the targeted killings of Hazaras in Quetta. In 2019, her activism earned her a place among the BBC's list of 100 most inspiring and influential women around the world.

Perversely, her achievements seem to have kindled the suspicions of ever-sensitive state functionaries. Are we to assume that raising a voice for those who have been denied their rights is a subversive activity?

Whoever is responsible for the disservice to the country's global image on account of the recent episode must be held accountable.

The increasing tendency to detain people on the basis of a 'black list' which has no basis in law — or to place them on the ECL without following the prescribed procedure — also demands the government's attention. Such methods of state oppression are employed in countries where the right to due process holds no meaning. We should steer clear of that disreputable club of nations.

## US on CPEC

HIGH-level engagements between the US and Pakistan on Tuesday resulted in some interesting outcomes. Meeting Prime Minister Imran Khan in Davos, President Donald Trump, who called Mr Khan his "friend", said that Pakistan and the US had never been as close as they were now.

But though this camaraderie is welcome, speaking in Islamabad, Alice Wells, the State Department's senior official looking after the South Asia file, delivered yet another critique of CPEC. Ms Wells made some very serious allegations, claiming that firms blacklisted by the World Bank had got CPEC contracts, adding that Pakistan was walking into a debt trap laid by China.

She also urged the government to be more "transparent" about the flagship scheme, described as a game changer by the state.

On Wednesday, the Chinese embassy in Pakistan released a rejoinder to the American official's criticism. While observing that Beijing would be "more than glad" to see the deepening of Pakistan-US ties, it dismissed the American

criticism as “negative propaganda”. It also pointedly asked what Washington had done for Pakistan.

Some background is necessary here. During the Trump administration, ties between China and the US have been especially frosty, and Ms Wells’s critique of CPEC must be seen in this geopolitical perspective.

However, while good advice from our foreign friends is always welcome, they should avoid giving Pakistan lectures on how to conduct its foreign policy. True, there are some concerns regarding CPEC, and this paper has always called for all projects under the scheme to be made more transparent, and to benefit Pakistan in the long run. But for the Americans to wholly dismiss this giant collaborative effort between Pakistan and China is unacceptable.

Also, the relationship between Islamabad and Beijing is decades old and has a strategic dimension, and Pakistan can ill afford to ditch an ally simply to please another foreign friend. This country values its relationship with the US, but as the Chinese have rightly pointed out, what has Washington done of recent to help uplift Pakistan economically, and stand by it in international forums?

Concerning Mr Trump’s comments, while the US president is prone to making hyperbolic statements, his newfound fondness for Pakistan should be appreciated. As for ties between the states being at an all-time high, this claim is debatable.

After all, the US and Pakistan were quite close when it came to dislodging the Soviets from Afghanistan under Gen Zia’s watch — though history will judge whether that endeavour was the wisest move to make for this country. Moreover, in the aftermath of 9/11, Gen Musharraf was walking in lockstep with Washington in the ‘war on terror’.

If Mr Trump really wants to take the bilateral relationship to new heights, then let the US offer this country trade, investment and assistance. Moreover, if Washington values Pakistan’s friendship, let it publicly back this country’s stance on India-held Kashmir, FATF and other critical matters.

## **ECP consensus**

AS the new ECP appointments show, where there is a will there is a way. There was much scepticism on the question of the politicians' ability to pass this test. But it seems that politics has won, and that consensus has prevailed despite many tense moments along the way. We need more such reminders to instil confidence in the people regarding the success of our as yet fledgling democratic system. The agreement reached by the 12-member bipartisan parliamentary panel over the names of the chief election commissioner and two ECP members from Sindh and Balochistan underscores the potential of our parliamentarians to tackle the most contentious of issues. It proves that when faced with political or legal challenges, they can, indeed, put aside their differences to find a solution. The cooperation between the treasury and opposition benches on amendments to the Army Act is yet another example — though admittedly a controversial one. Indeed, the appointment of the ECP members and chief election commissioner can be seen as a quid pro quo between the two sides. But that is what politics is all about.

With parliament having done its job, the burden of making the ECP an effective and independent entity lies on the new election commission chief. The mistrust between the opposition and government regarding each other's nominations was a key reason for the year-long squabbling and frequent deadlocks in negotiations over the ECP appointments. With the previous chief retiring last month, the ECP was rendered non-functional. The new head, retired bureaucrat Sikandar Sultan Raja, has his work cut out for him. The first task before him is the finalisation of the electoral rolls and making arrangements for the earliest possible holding of smooth, long-overdue local government polls in Punjab and KP. Secondly, he needs to speed up the hearings on the foreign funding cases against the parties for an early settlement of the issue. At the same time, Mr Raja should firm up effective proposals for parliament to further strengthen the powers of the ECP in order to rebuild the public's confidence in it. The local government elections will demonstrate the impartiality of the ECP under him and define the rest of his tenure as the head of the commission. The task he is facing is enormous. But he can draw strength from the confidence the parliamentarians have reposed in him on behalf of the people who want democracy to flourish in this country.

## **Film release blocked**

IN his life, Saadat Hasan Manto continually faced charges of obscenity for his short stories. This led him to declare: “If you cannot bear these stories then the society is unbearable. Who am I to remove the clothes of this society, which itself is naked. I don’t even try to cover it, because it is not my job, that’s the job of dressmakers.” Decades later, the ‘dressmakers’ continue to find new reasons to cloak uncomfortable truths. Filmmaker Sarmad Khoosat experienced the spectacle first-hand, with the commotion created around the release of his film *Zindagi Tamasha*. Despite being cleared by various censor boards that are known for being ‘strict’, the growing pressure from religious hardliners — based on assumptions they formed while watching a two-minute-long trailer — led to an unspecified delay in its release date. Members of the TLP called for protest rallies against the film, leading to the governments of Sindh and Punjab blocking its release. Meanwhile, Mr Khoosat felt compelled to clarify that he was a “believer” like the protesters after he began receiving “dozens of threatening phone calls and [messages]”. Now, the special assistant to the prime minister on information and broadcasting has informed us that the Central Board of Film Censors has approached the Council of Islamic Ideology for its opinion. While this has resulted in the TLP calling off its protest for the time being, it sets the wrong precedent. Should the council be expected to judge the artistic merit of films in the future?

Far too often, the state cedes to the demands of undemocratic mobs. A refusal to look at reality with all its nuances or have honest conversations about sensitive issues has resulted in a distinctive hypocrisy that permeates Pakistani society. Art has the power to plant the seeds of doubt and challenge long-held prejudices, by creating empathy with those we deem to be very different from ourselves. It is tragic that this threatens some so deeply.

## **Pakistan-India ties**

THE frosty ties between Pakistan and India are a matter of concern for the international community, primarily because of the fact that two nuclear-armed neighbours locking horns spells an imminent threat to world peace. However, while this country has made several peace overtures to its eastern neighbour,



these have nearly all gone unanswered. Therefore, perhaps the international community needs to do much more to facilitate a positive dialogue between Islamabad and New Delhi that can help defuse tensions, and usher in an era of amity in South Asia. In the current testy times, these proposals may be far-fetched, but it is in the face of such challenges that true statesmen rise above the din and make efforts for peace. On Wednesday, speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Prime Minister Imran Khan discussed the need for the UN and the US to play a greater role in preventing tensions in South Asia. Moreover, while appearing on a local TV show, the ambassadors of Germany and France, speaking on the occasion of the anniversary of 1963's Élysée Treaty, said President Donald Trump can play a role in bringing Pakistan and India closer, while adding that, historically, the Americans helped in uniting erstwhile enemies in Europe.

While India, stubbornly, has always insisted on settling all matters with Pakistan bilaterally, in the world of realpolitik, when powerful actors 'advise' others, it is difficult to ignore their suggestions, especially regarding strategic and economic ties. While India pretends to not be swayed by outside influence, if the US and EU convince the powers that be in New Delhi that better ties with Pakistan are in the best interests of the region, it will be hard for India to ignore such proposals. Mr Khan's calls for the international community to play a greater role in helping create an atmosphere of peace in South Asia must be heeded by those that wield power in the global arena. This country has rightly condemned India's brutal tactics in held Kashmir, as well as New Delhi's anti-Muslim laws. But while maintaining its principled stand on these critical issues, efforts to talk peace with India should be pursued.

As for the Franco-German example, indeed there is much that both Pakistan and India can learn from that historic experience, though the European project has severely been jolted by Brexit. It is a fact that the French and Germans — mortal enemies during the Second World War — managed to move beyond a bloody history and create a close relationship under the EU umbrella. While it would be naive to copy and paste Europe's experiences in South Asia, there is little doubt that Pakistan and India can replicate some of the best practices France and Germany have pursued to transform enmity into friendship. Perhaps the Europeans can make better use of their good offices to promote peace in South Asia.

## Virus panic

ONCE again, a new strain of coronavirus is making headlines and spreading panic around the world. While not much is known about the infection at this stage, it is thought to have spread from an animal to people — with increasing fears of human-to-human transmission — and has similarities to the SARS outbreak of the early 2000s. It is being called by some as its “cousin virus”.

For now, it is simply referred to as the 2019-nCoV. Like SARS, the contagious virus attacks the respiratory system and includes symptoms of the common cold in its early stages, which can then develop into bronchitis and pneumonia, or even lead to kidney failure. The elderly, children and those with weak immune systems are particularly vulnerable to its effects.

So far, there is no known antibiotic to contain its transmission, and it is indeed spreading far and wide. The first case was recorded in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in China. Now, within a span of a few weeks, a total of at least 17 deaths have been recorded. In China, over 570 cases have been detected, while symptoms of the virus have been found in a host of neighbouring places — Taiwan, Japan, Thailand and South Korea — and as far off as the United States, which recorded its first case on Jan 21.

As a result, strict travel restrictions have been imposed on Wuhan and some other Chinese cities. And while the World Health Organisation has postponed its decision to declare a global health emergency, necessary precautions must be taken to curtail its spread. Airports, in particular, must remain vigilant, even if it results in some inconvenience and increased air traffic in arrivals and departures, with millions of people expected to travel for the Lunar New Year holidays over the weekend.

Like other countries around the world, Pakistan too has begun screening passengers arriving from China at the Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad airports, while hospitals have been notified and instructed to pay close attention to symptoms of cold, cough, fever or pneumonia in patients who have recently returned from China.

Pakistan already has a host of viruses to battle against, ranging from the polio to the Congo virus. With its strained healthcare system; it cannot afford new infections. Many Chinese citizens live in Pakistan, and while one cannot endorse

unnecessary fear and panic that quickly turns into xenophobia for some, the state must remain vigilant.

## **Media in chains**

SADLY, the Pakistan Media Freedom Report 2019 by the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors contains little that is new or reassuring for journalists in the country. Indeed, it underscores the intimidating conditions in which they are compelled to work. According to the report, at least seven media persons were killed — murders that remain unsolved — and the press continued to face extreme threats to its functioning during 2019. Around 60 journalists, including 50 from Sindh alone, were booked in 35 cases under anti-terrorism and other laws. One of them, Chaudhry Nasrullah, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for possessing banned literature, the first such conviction under the Anti-Terrorism Act. In a pattern similar to last year, the report holds “mysterious and unidentified actors” as posing the biggest threat to press freedom, followed by non-state elements and outlawed militant groups.

However, the fact is that whichever quarter the threat emanates from, the buck stops with the government. And unfortunately the media environment has deteriorated further under the current dispensation. From boots-on-the-ground journalists to others such as editors, directors news, etc, who work behind the scenes, all are affected. The media as a whole is at the receiving end of a sustained campaign that seeks to micromanage how news stories are handled, which topics/events are covered and which ones are dropped. Live interviews of opposition figures have been stopped midway, TV channels taken off air for broadcasting press conferences by out-of-favour politicians, news anchors (temporarily) ordered not to offer opinions on talk shows, not even their own — and this is only a partial list. Resistance comes at a price: media outlets have seen their revenue streams choked, circulation disrupted through strong-arm methods, threats of violence hurled by ‘participants’ at manufactured protests, etc. The result is a chill descending on what should be a vibrant profession with a questioning spirit. A government that cannot tolerate an independent media or protect journalists has but a tenuous claim to democratic credentials.

## Corruption index

THE political mudslinging that has ensued over Transparency International's latest report shows all that is wrong with the way our politics deals with important priorities and its sheer inability to work with numbers and data. The TI ranking shows deterioration in Pakistan's standing in the world in terms of corruption rankings, going down three notches to 120 out of 180 countries. Last year, Pakistan had ranked at 117. Politicians from the opposition parties seized on this report to taunt the ruling party for failing in its core aim ie the elimination of corruption. To its further discredit, the ruling party's spokesperson responded by alleging bias at TI, followed by a vitriolic attack on the integrity of the global corruption watchdog. Perhaps it needs to be pointed out to Ms Firdous Ashiq Awan, who made these remarks, that for many years now her own party leaders, including Imran Khan himself, have used the same TI reports and rankings to criticise previous governments and buttress their own claim that corruption alone is responsible for all the ills of society.

The ranking is just a perception index, meaning it is generated from responses given by a set of business executives to questions that are asked of them about their experience of interacting with the government. It is not some kind of a hard measurement of the quantum of corrupt practices in society. It is not an economic indicator like GDP or even the credit rating of the country. In trying to defend her government against the opposition's attack, Ms Awan actually invoked Moody's and its recent decision to upgrade the outlook on Pakistan's credit rating to stable, saying that the action somehow negated the findings of TI. It does not because these are two completely different things. And back when the same rating agencies downgraded Pakistan last December, the ruling party's members cried foul and alleged bias, with one even trying to argue that the rating agencies were engaged in some sort of fifth-generation warfare being conducted by Pakistan's enemies.

Undoubtedly, there is need for greater maturity. The opposition can be faulted for incorrectly using the ranking to mock the ruling party, but they were subjected to similar taunts when they were in power and they argue that now it is the PTI's turn to field the same attacks that it launched on others in the past. The onus is on the ruling party, because it is in power, to show more responsibility when dealing with such attacks. A simple defence would be to point out that the fight

against corruption is a long-haul one, and small movements up or down in the rankings in one year is not about how they measure progress. There are significant messages in the TI report, chief among them the importance of campaign finance laws. Perhaps some attention can be focused on these as well.

## **Rohingya persecution**

ON Thursday, the International Court of Justice at The Hague ordered Myanmar to protect its long-persecuted Rohingya Muslim population and “take all measures within its powers” to prevent a genocide from taking place against them. By all means, this judgement is necessary — even if it is delayed. After all, ‘genocide’ is not a word thrown around lightly in such proceedings. And it would not have been possible without the efforts of Gambian Justice Minister Abubacarr Tambadou, who said that the events of recent years — the mass slaughter, rape and displacement of the Rohingya, carried out by the Myanmar military between August 2016 and October 2017, while the government of Ms Aung San Suu Kyi looked on in silence or offered apologetics when pushed to answer — gave him flashbacks of the Rwandan genocide. No genocide can be committed without extended dehumanisation campaigns preceding it. For instance, amidst allegations of rape and sexual violence used by Myanmar’s military against the Rohingya women, one Rakhine State minister callously retorted: “Look at those women who are making these claims — would anyone want to rape them?” There is a long history of maltreatment towards “the world’s most persecuted minority”, but most significant was the decision to strip the Rohingya of all formal citizenship in the 1980s. This move essentially rendered them Citizens of Nowhere, with no country to call their own and no rights to speak of. The ambiguity surrounding their identity has not only deprived them of higher education, travel and trade — essentially, making them prisoners in their own land — it has also made them vulnerable to violence which is rooted in Islamophobia and justified using the language of fighting terrorism. For decades, the Rohingya have borne the brunt of state oppression and deep-seated societal prejudice, culminating in the recent brutal campaign which resulted in approximately 800,000 Rohingya fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh.

Over the decades, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled persecution in Myanmar and settled in mostly Bangladesh, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Even in

their new lands, where they are relatively safe from physical harm, their lack of formal status continues to trouble them. For instance, in Pakistan, Burmese Muslims are routinely harassed by the police and forced to pay extortion. Without formal citizenship, they also face great hurdles in pursuing higher education and accessing health facilities, thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

## **Costlier Haj**

INFLATION has hit all sectors of society and even the performance of religious rites has been affected by the price hike. As reported in this paper on Friday, the Senate Standing Committee on Religious Affairs has been told that the cost of performing Haj under the government scheme has shot up by a steep Rs115,000. Now, performing the pilgrimage to the holy sites in Hejaz will cost intending hajjis Rs550,000 from the north of the country, and a few thousand rupees less from the southern parts of Pakistan. The Senate committee was told that the cabinet would make the final decision in this regard. It was stated that the sharp rise in Haj cost has been attributed to depreciation of the rupee as well as a hike in taxes related to the pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

While religious injunctions state that only those with means are mandated to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lives, such a costly government Haj package amounts to depriving the average Pakistani of the chance of performing this key religious requirement. Those with deep pockets can perform privately operated 'five-star' pilgrimages every year, but for countless hardworking people who save up their entire lives to be able to perform Haj, the steep price hike will shatter this lifelong dream. The government says it is talking to the Saudi authorities for relaxation of certain taxes on Pakistani pilgrims. These efforts should be followed up, and considering the warm ties between Islamabad and Riyadh, our Saudi friends should consider lowering taxes for Pakistani hajjis. Moreover, the government should consider introducing a need-based subsidy for those intending to go for Haj, but who are unable to meet the high cost. Perhaps a qarz-i-hasana model can be adopted in this respect; intending citizens can be given interest-free loans to cover majority of the cost, to be paid back in manageable instalments. The cabinet should consider all available options before making the final decision, and keep the wishes of the average Pakistani in mind when doing so.

## Knee-jerk U-turns'

INDUSTRY associations are stepping forward to express their disappointment that commitments made to them are quickly withdrawn, and one of the largest such groups has even referred to this pattern as 'knee-jerk U-turns' in policy implementation. The latest such example is a notification issued by the power division that tells all distribution companies to include add-ons and surcharges on top of the 7.5 cents per unit that the exporter community was told they will have to pay for power. The commitment was given at a very high level last year and on Jan 13 of this year, it was not only withdrawn, but exporters were told it would be effected retroactively from Jan 1, 2019. What this means, effectively, is not only that the government is withdrawing the commitment, but has reneged on it altogether and now wants to collect all the monetary benefit that exporters have availed through it to be returned to it.

Beyond the power tariff, the government has also reversed a tax credit that had been offered earlier for investment in plant and machinery. This had the same effect as being retrospectively applicable since the investment had already been made under the assumption that the funds utilised would benefit from the tax credit. The government could reverse its commitment, but the funds once committed cannot be similarly reversed. On top of that, the government had announced an incentive package for mobile phone assembly in Pakistan, and once the investment had been made by a number of parties, it cut import duties on mobile phones, rendering the investment suddenly non-competitive. One after another, examples are piling up of the government making commitments and promises on one day, then either reneging on these outright or finding clever ways to not deliver on its commitments the next.

This is no way to run an economy. Industry leaders are now openly suggesting that policymaking has become dysfunctional. "Ministries are working in silos," the Pakistan Business Council said in its statement on the problem, and the only priority that seems to be guiding government decision-making is 'chasing revenue'. These reversals are all happening mainly for revenue purposes as the government ramps up its efforts to meet the ambitious targets laid out in the IMF programme in the second half of the fiscal year. In the process, all other priorities are obliterated, whether these include the promotion of exports or indigenisation of mobile phone assembly or the promotion of investment and industrial capacity.

This speaks to a state of near policy paralysis with the government reduced to chasing revenue and building reserves to meet short-term targets only. A strong hand is needed on the tiller to navigate the choppy waters of the ongoing adjustment to rectify this situation. Left to its own devices, this sort of economic management will not pave the way for growth.

## **UK's travel advisory**

WITH the UK changing its travel advisory to Pakistan to reflect the improved security situation in the country, officialdom here has been given some breathing space.

In a statement, the British high commissioner to Pakistan, Dr Christian Turner, said: "Following my arrival in December 2019, I made this review of the travel advice a priority. It is great credit to the hard work of the government of Pakistan in delivering improved security over the past five years. I am delighted that British nationals will be able to see more of what Pakistan has to offer."

The statement went on to say the improved security situation allowed British Airways to return to Pakistan as well as the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

This is a welcome step by the UK government and will hopefully send a positive signal to other countries also. It is indeed remarkable that in a span of five years, Pakistan has successfully broken the back of terrorism and brought life back to its normal rhythm.

Very few countries have achieved this level of success in combating terrorism in such a short period of time. This success has come at a steep cost in terms of precious lives lost and property destroyed. Now that we have overcome this threat, it is critical that the state initiate deep-seated reforms that address the root causes of extremism in our society so that this success becomes a permanent reality.

In the meantime, however, the world must appreciate and recognise the improved security situation and take steps that help Pakistan reinforce its more positive image. It is hoped that more countries will follow the UK's example, re-evaluate their travel advisories and encourage their citizens to come experience Pakistan in all its living colours.



Pakistan may want to specifically market its regions for greater travel and visit opportunities. If there are some areas of concern in terms of security, those need to be focused on. Our aim should be to translate this improved security situation into a larger inflow of people coming here for tourism and business. In this respect, Karachi deserves special attention being the hub of commercial activity.

The city has suffered from law-and-order issues but can also boast success in overcoming this challenge. We need to now aggressively market this new normal across the world and reap the dividends of this success both in terms of perception and foreign exchange.

## **PTV licence fee**

IF the intent was to engender even less goodwill among the public towards it the PTV may have certainly succeeded, but in all other respects its plan to raise its revenue by increasing the TV licence fee included in our electricity bills is doomed from the outset. It is telling of the mindset of those in charge of the public broadcaster that their singular concern is bridging the financial shortfall — amounting to Rs20bn a year — by passing the buck on to cash-strapped consumers, who have already experienced an eye-watering increase in power tariffs over the past 18 months. On the other hand, the only cost-cutting measure the PTV appears to have taken is to reduce the age of retirement for employees, thus saving approximately Rs18m a year. Proposing a bailout for itself without any financial plan or business development strategy that might justify the additional cost to consumers betrays just how much the PTV takes the public for granted — as well as its current lack of coherence and vision.

The PTV of today is a far cry from its golden days under the pioneering stewardship of Aslam Azhar, when the content it produced was a matter of pride for all Pakistanis. The public broadcaster was a vanguard in supporting public interest journalism, culture and the arts. Nowadays, instead of being a public service for the people, it has become, at best, an irrelevant and antiquated behemoth and, at worst, a political tool for the government of the day. The PTI's 2018 election manifesto pledged to make the PTV autonomous, with its own board of governors, "similar to the BBC model" — a claim that was often repeated by its government's first information minister. It is clear, however, that the change that was promised is nowhere in sight. Unless there is considerable

restructuring of the corporation, including ensuring a completely independent and autonomous board, with a mission to deliver high-quality public interest programming, it is hardly worth justifying its existence let alone a licence fee hike.

## **Baghdad protest**

IN its limited understanding of events, particularly the complex workings of the Middle East, the Trump administration feels it has achieved a masterstroke by assassinating Iranian Gen Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad earlier this month. However, in much of the region the hit has galvanised anti-American sentiment, with the peoples of the Middle East denouncing Washington's brazen disregard for other states' sovereignty, with calls for the US military to leave the region. Soon after the strike that took the lives of Soleimani and several others, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a prominent commander of Iraq's Hashd al-Shaabi, the Iraqi parliament passed a motion calling for the removal of all American forces from their country. On Friday, thousands of followers of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr — whose forces have battled American troops in Iraq in years past — staged a massive march in Baghdad telling the “occupier” to “get out”. Muqtada al-Sadr also called for security arrangements between Iraq and the US to be cancelled.

The anti-American rage in Iraq is understandable, and the Soleimani assassination is only one of many triggers of the Iraqi unrest. Nearly 17 years after America invaded their country to rid it of weapons of mass destruction that have yet to be found, Iraqis have little to cheer about. While it is true that corruption among the Iraqi ruling elite plays a substantial part in the miseries of that country, clearly the root cause of Iraq's deprivation is the American invasion. George W. Bush's ill-advised foray managed to dislodge a dictator — though once upon a time Saddam Hussein was a valuable client in the campaign against Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran — but at the same time it destroyed a functioning country. Even elsewhere in the Middle East, America's actions, along with many of its European and Arab allies, have brought nothing but trouble for the peoples of this region, with regime change helping fuel further chaos. For example, in Syria, the US-led bloc intervened in what was purely a domestic uprising against Bashar al-Assad's iron-fisted rule, resulting in the internationalisation of the conflict, as Russia and Iran jumped in to protect their ally. The chaos in Syria also gave spaces for deadly outfits like the militant Islamic State group and Al Qaeda to take refuge in.

Yet, apparently no lessons have been learnt, as America still seems intent on playing global policeman. For example, Brian Hook, Mr Trump's point man on Iran, has been quoted as saying that if Esmail Qaani, Gen Soleimani's successor as Quds Force head, continues to threaten American interests, "he will meet the same fate". Instead of indulging in such arrogant behaviour and imperilling the security of the region, the US needs to change tack. It should not be playing the role of an imperial overlord. If America were to approach the Middle Eastern countries with respect, it could go a long way in improving its own security, as well as that of the region.

## **A standard curriculum**

IN theory, education should be the great leveller. However, in many other post-colonial nations like Pakistan it is quite the opposite. Parallel systems of education in this country — private, public and madressah — generally serve to reinforce social divisions and act as a barrier to economic mobility. Justice, therefore, demands such a system be overhauled. In this context, Federal Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood, while attending an education seminar in London, reiterated a long-standing promise of Prime Minister Imran Khan. In a conversation with this paper, Mr Mahmood said that a uniform curriculum developed with the consensus of all stakeholders would be implemented across the board — in government and private schools as well as madressahs. He observed that at present the only career option for seminary students is to become prayer leaders, but that after sitting their board exams they would be eligible for "careers in the military, the police, or anywhere in the mainstream job market".

Aside from the injustice of having an educational framework where only a rarefied elite has access to the best career choices, creating a level playing field is also a practical concern. Education is a critical component of madressah reform, an issue that acquired greater urgency over the years as religious extremism tightened its grip on the country. It is true that only a small minority of seminaries, out of an estimated total of some 30,000 in total, have been imparting jihadist teachings, but young people frustrated by limited avenues of career advancement tend to be more easily seduced by extremist ideologies that can impart a sense of agency. However, standardising the curriculum should not be at the cost of the overall quality of education, otherwise everyone stands to

lose. An equally important consideration is the pedagogical method. After all, many madressahs have long taught 'worldly' subjects to their students but critical thinking is alien to their approach. Of utmost importance therefore is the recruitment of suitable teachers who will impart lessons in the uniform curriculum in a way that actually benefits the students when they test the waters of the job market. That will not be an easy task: madressahs, accustomed to being essentially independent entities, have resisted multiple efforts at what they perceive as state ingress into their functioning. However, the government by making madressah reform part of the national education reform initiative may have adopted a course more acceptable to these institutions.

## **Women on wheels**

ON Friday, hundreds of women were issued driving certificates and employment with a ride-hailing service at a packed event organised by Women on Wheels in Karachi. A few months earlier, these women had received training after the initiative was first launched in the city in November 2019. And there are now plans to extend the programme to other parts of Sindh. Since its inauguration in Punjab four years ago, WoW has tried to empower thousands of women to ride motorcycles, along with offering them subsidised bikes, as a way to encourage women's mobility and normalise their presence on the roads. While Pakistani women have made great strides over the years, and more and more women enter the workforce each year, the mere sight of a woman riding a motorcycle to reach her destination is still seen as an anomaly here. Typically, women sit at the back of the motorcycle, behind a male member of the family, often nestling a child or two precariously in their laps, while their flowing dupattas or abayas risk getting entangled in the wheels of the motorcycle — which is a common cause for accidents.

Women riding motorcycles or bicycles — to get to work, to run errands, or simply for leisure — are an everyday sight in many parts of Asia, including some Muslim countries. Unfortunately, Pakistan lags behind the rest of the world in many regards, and the belief that 'good' women do not leave their homes or have lives independent of men is still persistent. Hopefully, with the continuation of initiatives such as WoW, the sight of women on wheels will become so commonplace within a few years that it will not raise eyebrows nor lead to lewd comments and leering — in other words, it will be a journey as comfortable as it

is for men. After all, it is only fair that half the country's population receives its full right to occupy public space without fear of harassment, intimidation and judgement.

## **Trouble in Punjab**

PRIME Minister Imran has reportedly said an 'organised mafia' is spreading negativity and crippling positive administrative changes in the country and that he is well aware who this mafia is.

Meeting with party members in Lahore, the prime minister said his party would take no pressure and Usman Buzdar would continue to work as the chief minister of Punjab. He was also emphatic in saying the chief secretary and IG police would work as a team with the chief minister.

The prime minister's visit to Lahore came at a time when there is a growing perception that Usman Buzdar's government is failing to perform and is suffering from political instability.

Recent grumblings from key allies like the PML-Q have fanned the flames of dissension within the Punjab coalition ranks. The prime minister was expected to resolve these issues through personal intervention and take decisions aimed at stopping the plunging fortunes of the Buzdar government.

Instead, however, the prime minister decided to blame 'mafias' for all the troubles that his government is facing in Punjab. He did not deem it necessary to elaborate on who these mafias are, how they are so effective in creating problems plaguing the Buzdar government and why they have not been stopped from making such mischief.

In fact, the prime minister did not even specify if he had any plans to counter these 'mafias' and, in the absence of such a plan, how would these troubles swirling around his chief minister disappear?

The only substantive announcement that we heard was that Buzdar would stay in office and that the political disconnect between the elected representatives and the bureaucracy would be eliminated.

These are pious words, but words alone are clearly insufficient to solve the governance quagmire in Punjab.

It would be a hard sell for the PTI leadership to blame the opposition for its failure in Punjab. All that is going wrong in Punjab is a by-product of what the ruling coalition has done or, more specifically, not done.

Now that the prime minister has announced that his team will remain where it is in Punjab, one expects that he will tell us how this team plans to improve the dismal situation in the province. Doing more of the same, or aiming for vague targets like 'better coordination', is clearly not the answer.

The answer, sadly, remains elusive. The ruling coalition has a razor-thin majority in the Punjab assembly, and if the allies run out of patience with the Buzdar government, they could exercise options that may pose serious danger to the chief minister.

The PML-Q has said it does not want to walk out from the coalition, but that does not mean all is well. The prime minister might want to absorb the gravity of the situation in Punjab and come up with specific solutions.

## **Student unions**

JUST when it needed to lend support, the Higher Education Commission has instead vocalised its opposition to the restoration of student unions in educational institutions. In an official document, the HEC stated that it would prefer students across the country to occupy their minds with poetry, music and sports rather than then wasting their time with politics. While the former are all noble and necessary pursuits, this does not mean that political activity cannot be a 'healthy' exercise or that it should be discouraged on this basis. Politics is not a 'dirty' word, and such perceptions (particularly entrenched within the middle and upper classes over the past few decades), need to be challenged. This cannot happen by creating apolitical spaces — indeed, there is no such thing — but by creating better ways of doing and thinking about politics.

When Gen Ziaul Haq banned student unions in 1984, the reason provided was that such bodies lead to violence on campuses. Yet violence intensified even after the ban, with the reactionary student wings of mainstream political parties threatening and enforcing their ideologies on others through brute force. Last

year, scores of students attached to progressive movements took to the streets to demand the restoration of student unions. Their voices and concerns cannot simply be dismissed without a greater debate, which involves students as the main stakeholders, especially at a time when issues such as sexual harassment on campuses are being talked about. As a result of their agitation, the Sindh cabinet approved a draft of the Sindh Students Union Act, 2019, which would allow for the revival of student unions in the province. Members of the Balochistan Assembly have also called for a similar legislature. Cultivating a culture of robust debate and a respect for differences of opinion are not only vital to any functioning democracy, they are also the very foundations of a healthy society. And this needs to begin at the campus level, which should ideally be safe spaces for new thought, exercises in community-building, and a connection with the issues plaguing their societies — and not simply a place that encourages the individualistic pursuit of grades and pits one student against another in a spirit of competitiveness and thoughtless compliance. We have to consider what kind of future we are cultivating right now.

## **Media crisis**

TO say that the Pakistani media is going through a grave crisis would be an understatement. The drop in revenues and stagnant state of the national economy overall has had a devastating effect on the country's media organisations, with salaries slashed and hundreds of workers laid off. To add to this, many organisations have not paid their employees for weeks, if not months. When there are bills to pay and mouths to feed and the bank account is empty, the effect on people's mental and physical health can be shattering. Over the past few months, many journalists and media workers have struggled to bear the stress of unforgivably delayed salaries. Last week, Fayyaz Ali, a cameraman at Capital TV, passed away due to a heart attack, perhaps caused by the stress of not receiving his dues for several months. The PM's special assistant Firdous Ashiq Awan condoled with the late worker's family the other day, observing that a databank would be created to keep track of workers whose salaries had not been paid. The late worker's employer announced compensation for his family, while Ms Awan said his brother would be given a job in the information ministry.

Perhaps if the channel and government had acted earlier, Fayyaz Ali would be alive today. While media houses must explain why they are holding up salaries

for months on end, the government also cannot be absolved of blame in this matter, especially when it withholds ads — and, worse still, outstanding dues amounting to hundreds of millions of rupees — as a political tool. Moreover, Pemra needs to play a more proactive role in ensuring that TV channels, where the issue of delayed salaries is most acute, pay dues on time. If media organisations refuse to do so, perhaps their licenses should be cancelled. Instead of making whimsical pronouncements, Pemra needs to focus on making the government pay its dues, and hold off on issuing new licenses until the crisis subsides and the media industry's health improves.

## **Railways in the dock**

IT may not be the best venue, but Federal Minister for Railways Sheikh Rashid was delivered the right message by the Supreme Court on Tuesday. He was asked why he did not resign after the horrific Tezgam fire in which 73 passengers perished on his watch.

Ideally the question should come from the prime minister, or the minister's cabinet colleagues, or his constituents. But as it turns out, the Supreme Court is now the place where federal ministers will have to answer for their performance track record, and especially if the track record should include such heinous lapses as that which resulted in the train accident in Rahim Yar Khan last year. According to some reports, the year 2019 was one of the worst suffered by the railways, with more than 100 fatal/non fatal accidents.

Throughout the year, the railways minister was often seen on television talking about the politics of the day, making predictions about the direction in which the wind will blow in Islamabad, and even proffering theories on why the price of flour began skyrocketing in December.

One thing he seldom commented on was the condition of the railways. Even after the Tezgam fire, all he could do was promise an inquiry, following which a few junior officials were dismissed and there ended the tale. Last June, when another accident involving a collision between a passenger train and a goods train left three people dead and several others injured, the minister asked for forgiveness from the country after accepting responsibility. But the time for empty words, false promises and crocodile tears must end at some point.



Since nobody in the government seems to be watching the performance of the railways minister, despite the accidents and the deaths, it appears the Supreme Court has taken up the job.

The court has asked for a business plan to show what the minister's plans are for returning the railways to financial viability, and given him two weeks to furnish this. Of course it is understood that there is no such plan, nor has there been any work towards developing one. And the best that can be done in two weeks is a bare sketch of how the enterprise can be returned to financial health.

This is all the court can expect from Sheikh Rashid, though it can continue to demand more detailed follow-up. In the end, the realisation is going to have to sink in that he is not the man for the job. Looking after the railways is a big undertaking and carries enormous responsibility, given the millions of people who travel on it. Somebody serious about the task is needed for it, and the court may have no choice but to soon ask the government to mount a search.

## Cost of conflict

DURING the height of the Cold War, a Khmer Rouge general responsible for the death of an estimated two million Cambodians reportedly said: "A landmine is a perfect soldier. Ever courageous, never sleeps, never misses." Decades later, millions of anti-personnel landmines scattered during the various wars and conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries continue to haunt soldiers and civilians alike. A particularly sinister tool of psychological warfare created to maim rather than kill, anti-personnel landmines are also used to hurt populations economically by depriving them of land or rendering it uncultivable. Relatively cheap to produce, the human cost of landmines is insurmountable, even decades after a conflict has ended. Additionally, IEDs pose an even greater threat in countries plagued by terrorism, including Pakistan. A detailed report in this paper on Monday illustrated how such unexploded ordnances take a toll on the people of the tribal districts. And it is children — caught in the crosshairs of battles they do not understand and have no part in creating — that pay the heaviest price, as they frequently mistake weapons for toys. Since the passing over two decades ago of the Mine Ban Treaty, which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines, the latest Landmine Monitor Report notes there has been a drop in the global use and production of anti-personnel

landmines. Significantly, a handful of former war-torn countries have been declared landmine-free since endorsing the treaty. However, a high number of casualties continue to be reported from Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Mozambique, Somalia, Bosnia and Croatia.

Pakistan is one of only 33 countries that are not signatories to the Mine Ban Treaty. Other notable exceptions include the US, Russia, China, Israel and Egypt. The official reason given is that India, too, has not done so. As a consequence, the sprinkling of landmines along the Line of Control was once routine. While Pakistan has relatively fewer casualties from landmines as compared to other countries, reports of mostly children and women injured and killed in Balochistan, KP and parts of Punjab close to the border keep resurfacing in newspapers. Along with increasing awareness campaigns and building medical facilities, effective channels of communication during the clearance exercises can go a long way in building confidence with long-marginalised communities. Instead of alienating them further, they must be brought into the fold. But this requires listening instead of reacting.

## **Witness protection**

IT is a fact that for the criminal justice system to deliver, a strong witness protection programme is needed. This is especially so in a country like Pakistan, where there is a huge backlog of cases concerning acts of terrorism and violent crime. Due to the nature of such offences and fearing retaliation by the perpetrators, witnesses are often afraid to testify. There have been instances where people have refused to give testimony in cases where notorious sectarian militants were being tried. As pointed out in a recent report in this paper, trials in terrorism cases in Sindh's anti-terrorism courts are being held up because the province's witness protection law, passed in 2017, has not been implemented. The result is a backlog of 1,700 cases in Sindh's 33 ATCs, and a conviction rate of around 17pc. The conviction rate in other provinces is hardly better in terrorism cases, with the lack of a proper witness protection mechanism contributing to this state of affairs.

When hardened criminals threaten witnesses or their families with dire consequences if they dare to testify, and the state does nothing to protect them, who will be brave enough to appear in the witness box? That is why the

provinces need to take serious measures to implement workable witness protection programmes that protect the identities of those who come forward to testify against violent individuals. As quoted in the aforementioned story, an ATC judge trying militants allegedly linked to the self-styled Islamic State group observed that “the public has become too frightened to assist the system fighting against terrorism...” To reduce this sense of fear, witnesses must be offered robust protection by the state, and new identities and relocation if need be. The methodology of advanced legal systems can be studied and their best practices replicated here. Unless the witness protection laws are implemented, many militants and violent actors will either walk free, or be gunned down in shadowy encounters due to the faulty criminal justice system.

## **Monetary policy**

THE State Bank has once again decided to hold interest rates steady, to the dismay of industry. But in doing so, it is now betraying the first signs of fatigue as it tries to keep the outlook for the future upbeat. There is no doubt that the economy is slowing sharply, investment is plummeting and unemployment coupled with inflation charging ahead. For the first time this fiscal year, the State Bank has acknowledged that its growth target of 3.5pc “is likely to be revised downward”. Until November the bank was hopeful that the growth target would be met. So the natural question arises: what has changed between November and January that makes it likely for the growth forecast to be revised downward?

One reads the accompanying monetary policy statement in vain for an answer. The external sector “continued to strengthen”, business confidence as per the State Bank’s survey showed improvement for the third consecutive wave and fiscal developments “remained on track”, according to the statement. Cumulatively, the bank tries to argue, these contributed to “buoying the overall economic reform sentiment”. In agriculture its assessment is unchanged from November, with major crop estimates in the Kharif season growing “in line with expectations”, except for cotton. In industry, the pattern is also the same as in November, with gains being seen in export-oriented and import-competing industries while “inward-oriented industries continue to slow down”. Taken together, these developments lead the State Bank to claim that “the slowdown in most economic sectors appears to have bottomed-out, and a gradual recovery is expected in the coming months”.

So if all this is the case, along with “a healthy increase” in tax revenue collections of 16pc and improved foreign exchange reserves, then why is the growth forecast being downgraded and why has inflation remained higher than expected? Inflation continues to rise month on month despite the fact that in November too the State Bank claimed that the higher inflation out-turns were temporary in nature and attributable to upward adjustments in administered prices (power and gas) as well as “temporary supply disruptions”. How long are these “temporary supply disruptions” supposed to bedevil the inflation outlook, and how many more upward adjustments in administered prices are on their way? It seems the State Bank would prefer to not answer this question. In fact, the latest monetary policy statement gives the impression that the State Bank is trying to whitewash what is a rather dismal economic state of affairs. Dr Reza Baqir may be new to the realities of Pakistan’s economic management, but he should know that those before him who tried to walk this path of bargaining with the central bank’s autonomy and credibility paid a heavy reputational price for it. The State Bank governor has a chance to save himself from considerable embarrassment down the road, and should stop trying to have it both ways.

## **Diplomatic dupery**

“NONSENSE” and “a thousand no’s” is how Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas reacted when he heard President Donald Trump unveil a plan whose only aim seemed to be to pamper the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee in an election year.

Mr Abbas rejected the plan, and declared his people “will not kneel and we will not surrender”.

With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu standing beside him, an American president who has upheld Israel’s occupation of a bit of even non-Palestinian territory — Syria’s Golan Heights — gave a verdict that was obviously ex parte, because there was no representative from the very people whose land was the subject of this diplomatic deception.

The ‘deal’ would invite ridicule because it brazenly upholds Israel’s crimes against the Palestinian people and underwrites the Jewish state’s unending violations of international treaties — to most of which America is party.

By accepting his plan, Mr Trump said, Israel had taken “a giant step toward peace”.

What exactly is this perfidy eulogised by Mr Trump? Answer: Israel will stop building new settlements on the West Bank for four years.

In other words, if the Palestinian Authority recognises Israeli sovereignty over the existing settlements, the Zionist state will after four years begin an open-ended renewal of the process of theft of Palestinian territory.

During this ‘freeze’, Palestinian statehood will be ‘negotiated’.

Moreover, the word ‘sovereignty’ is missing from the Trump idiom because it visualises a Palestinian state with its capital in eastern Jerusalem provided the Palestinian people take steps to become ‘self-governing’— a big diplomatic hokum.

The talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have remained suspended since 2014, because the Palestinians realised — perhaps too late — that Israel has no intention of giving up its pursuit of lebensraum, and that its sole aim is to delay the talks to enable it to change the West Bank’s demographic character.

Given the Arab-Islamic world’s powerlessness, there is little it can do to make Israel attach some sanctity to the agreements it signs.

The latest American plan serves to add to the heaps of treaties Israel and America have signed on a two-state solution. The most categorical of these documents was the 1993 Declaration of Principles — called the “peace of the brave” by former president Bill Clinton — but Israel destroyed this peace edifice brick by brick, and neither the Arab-Islamic world nor an America subservient to Israel had the courage to break Zionist hubris.

## **Yet another crackdown**

IF there were a tutorial for how to alienate a disaffected people even further, then the government is certainly making liberal use of it. The seemingly arbitrary arrest of prominent Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement leader Manzoor Pashteen in Peshawar on Monday is not a new tactic. Previous governments and regimes in Pakistan have likewise conflated the exercise of constitutionally protected civil

and political rights with crimes against the state in order to crack down on politicians and activists. Yet, instead of studying the flawed record of previous governments and rectifying matters, the current setup has failed to address the genuine concerns of citizens of this country who at the very least should be assured of a free and fair trial based on actionable evidence. The government's tone-deaf approach is only likely to intensify the people's estrangement, particularly following what transpired in Islamabad on Tuesday. The detention of over two dozen attendees of a peaceful protest outside the National Press Club in support of the PTM leader — including a sitting parliamentarian, women and students — was an excessive and foolhardy use of police force.

What makes these recent moves particularly counterintuitive is the fact that, as recently as Saturday, former KP chief minister and current Defence Minister Pervez Khattak extended an olive branch to the rights-based alliance, claiming that the government “want[s] to bring the PTM into the national mainstream as the country is passing through a difficult period of its history”. The government cannot be so cavalier in sending mixed signals when its conduct may prove the difference between conciliation and conflict with its own constituents. Pakistan is at a crossroads today, as a reawakening of political consciousness across society is increasingly exposing the limitations of a security-centric approach to governance. Suppression is not the answer. It is time to learn lessons from the past and acknowledge that dialogue is the only way out of this morass — and towards a future in which the rights of all Pakistanis are secured.

## **Indian bellicosity**

OVER the past several months, there has been a steady, disturbing rhythm of war drums emanating from New Delhi. India's top civil and military leaders have been making irresponsible statements where Pakistan is concerned, publicly rattling sabres mainly for domestic consumption — and vitiating the atmosphere in South Asia as a result.

On Tuesday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi while speaking at a gathering made the arrogant boast that his country could defeat Pakistan in a matter of days. Earlier, the Indian army chief had said that his troops could occupy Azad Kashmir if the Indian parliament asked them to do so. His predecessor — who is currently serving as chief of defence staff — made equally toxic remarks

regarding Pakistan. It would be naive to assume that these are all coincidences; quite clearly, the Indian establishment has attained a threatening posture and such signalling from the top is designed to bully and browbeat this country.

Firstly, the Indian leadership should not be under any illusions. Pakistan can and will defend itself in the face of any adventurism; last year's Balakot episode and its aftermath have proven as much. However, as this country's leadership has made quite clear on numerous occasions, Pakistan desires peace in the region and has thus responded to Indian provocations with restraint. Unfortunately, even on a popular level in India the dominant narrative is a hyper-nationalist one — fuelled by a bigoted ruling elite and a mostly venomous media — with a section of that country's citizens baying for this country's blood. By comparison, the average Pakistani has shown little desire for conflict, preferring a more mature handling of regional crises, though the public mood is likely to harden if Indian jingoism and threats continue.

Earlier, it was perceived that the BJP, staying true to its Hindutva roots, was demonising Pakistan as an election gimmick to win over its traditional constituency, the Hindu hard right. However, now it seems that the Indian establishment is continuing its Pakistan-bashing to divert attention from its domestic troubles. There has been considerable resistance within India from right-thinking members of all communities to New Delhi's xenophobic attempts to disenfranchise India's Muslims through legal means.

The harsh rhetoric against this country from Mr Modi and company appears to be designed to reassure his fan base that he remains 'tough' on Pakistan. However, such warmongering can have dangerous implications for regional peace, and Pakistan's restraint and measured behaviour should not be taken as a weakness. The international community, particularly those states who hold up India as a 'model' democracy, need to play a more active role in communicating to their friends in New Delhi that combustible statements can fuel actual hostilities. Pakistan wants peace, but it will not stand idly by as a bullying neighbour continues to threaten its sovereignty and dismiss all attempts at dialogue.

## **Pemra overreach**

AS the space for freedoms of information, speech and expression continues to shrink rapidly in Pakistan, the internet is still seen as the last refuge for

independent voices despite the arbitrary and ever-expanding censorship regime unleashed by the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act. Now, Pemra seems determined to deliver the final nail in the coffin. On Wednesday, Reporters Without Borders termed Pemra's draft proposal to regulate online video content (uploaded on its website earlier this month) as a "draconian" attempt at censorship, and criticised the regulatory authority for its "crude ploy of pretending to seek civil society's opinions".

Reportedly, Pemra has circulated another version of the draft regulation to the federal cabinet, which contains even more stringent measures than the document available to the public. If true, it is difficult to not assume bad faith on the part of Pemra. If the authority is sincere in being open to feedback from the public, however, then it must heed the statement issued by a number of citizens groups and media bodies — including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan — in which they unequivocally rejected the proposal in its entirety. The statement reminded the authority that its mandate "is to regulate the broadcast industry, not even regulate broadcast content, let alone online content" and that "attempts to self-expand its mandate to regulate the internet are dangerous by implication, and downright illegal, which will end up undermining Pakistan's digital future".

In essence, the draft proposal recommends that any entity within Pakistan uploading live or pre-recorded video content that it considers may potentially be a competitor to legacy broadcast media should fall under its purview, including licensing and content regulation. The licensing process alone — which includes an enormous upfront fee of between Rs5m-10m to register for one — would preclude most individuals from being able to create online video content. This represents a tremendous barrier to access, and is thus contrary to the spirit of a free and open internet.

Moreover, it is absurd for the authority to double down on content regulation by subjecting web TV and other forms of video content to a vaguely drafted code of conduct designed for TV channels, particularly when the also imprecisely worded Peca already governs that domain. This is a naked attempt to circumscribe citizens' fundamental rights, which carries the imprint of the authoritarian mind that conceived it, and belongs nowhere except in a dustbin.



# Polio workers

ONCE again, tragedy has followed Pakistan's polio eradication efforts into the new year.

This week, two polio workers were gunned down in the line of duty in Swabi, KP. While one of the women workers died immediately from the bullet wounds she sustained, the other succumbed to her injuries later in a hospital in Peshawar.

Last year, following the spread of harmful rumours about the polio vaccine's effects on children, several attacks were reported against polio workers. In Chaman, Balochistan, a woman polio worker was shot dead, while her colleague was wounded. Before that, there was a knife attack on a polio worker in Lahore by a parent who refused to have polio drops administered to his child.

That same year, two security officials who were guarding polio teams were killed in Buner and Bannu. Meanwhile, a string of other attacks on polio vaccination teams were also reported from other parts of Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab.

In the war against polio, Pakistan's front-line workers continue to pay the price of a society teeming with religious extremism, paranoia and disinformation around the vaccine. Such dangerous propaganda not only endangered the lives of workers, but led to a massive spike in the number of refusals last year. As a consequence, the total number of new cases reported in the country has been steadily increasing at a time when other countries are close to being declared polio-free, or have long been declared polio-free.

In 2019, the number of new cases shot up to 140, which included several cases of the P2 virus that was thought to have been eradicated. And yet, despite all the odds stacked against them in what often feels like a losing battle, polio workers put their lives at risk every few months, with each new polio drive, for a meagre pay. They not only come face to face with hostile populations, but also brave extreme weather patterns and harsh terrains to ensure the vaccine reaches even the most isolated parts of the country.