

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of April 2021

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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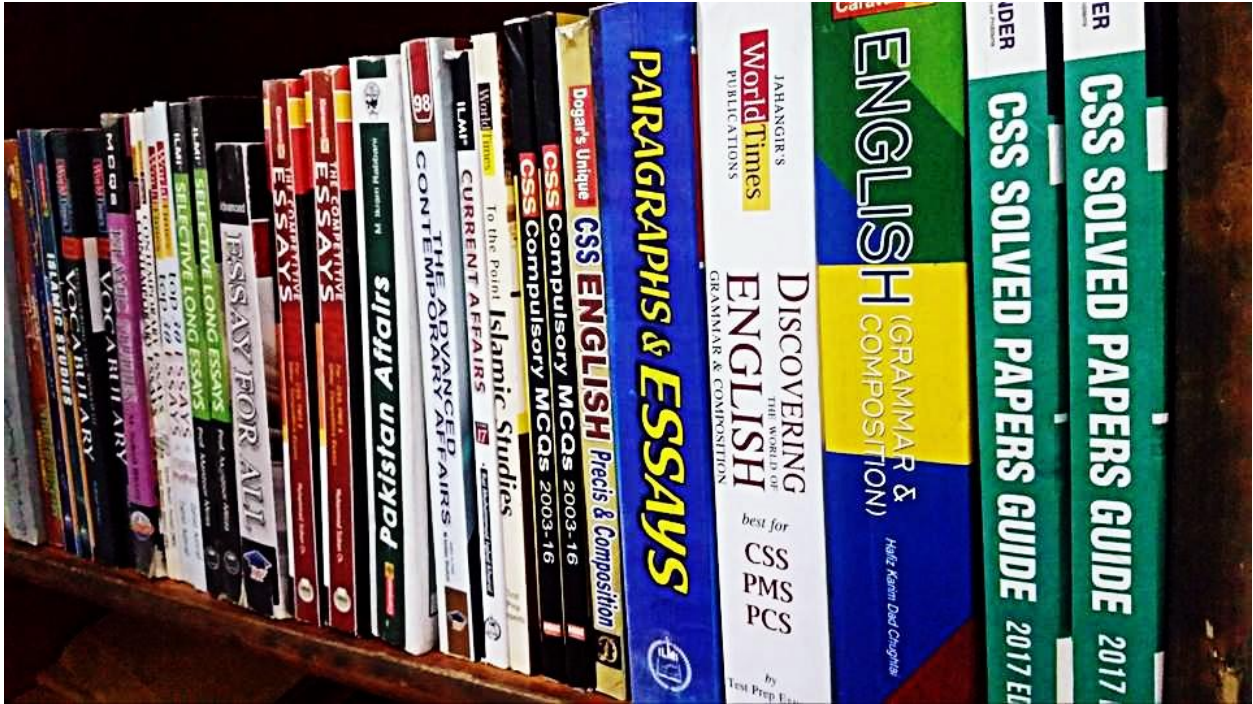
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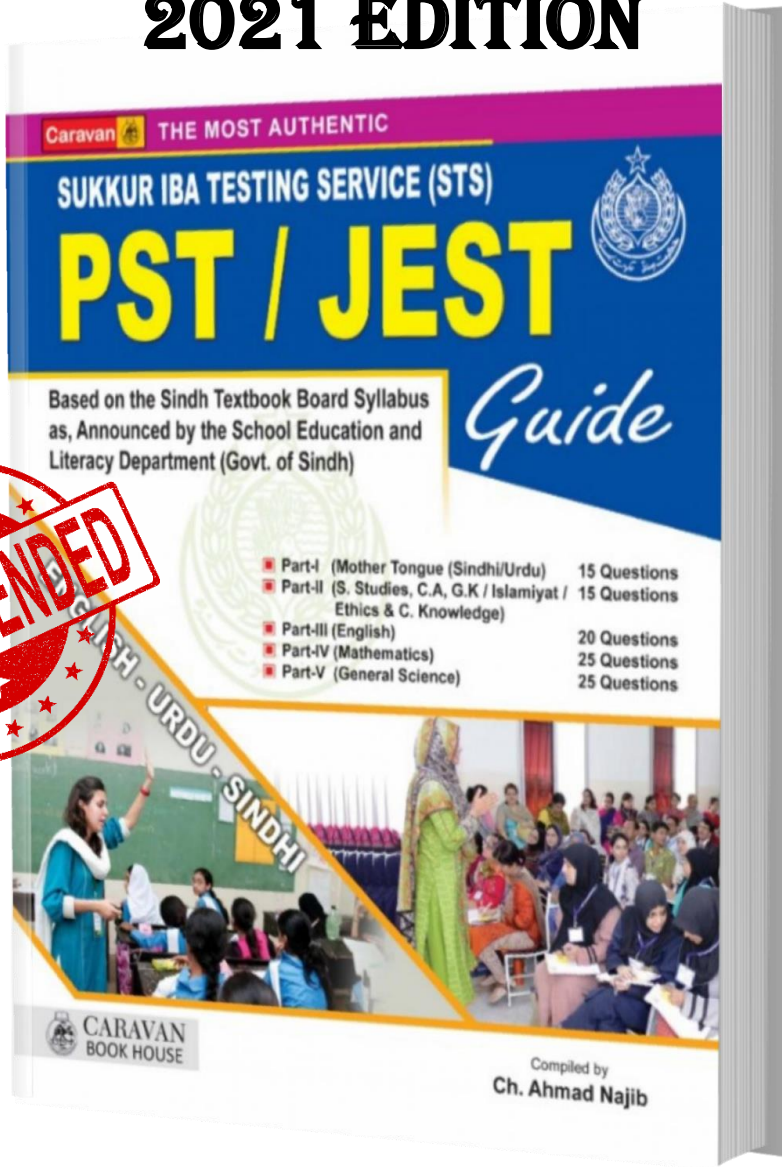
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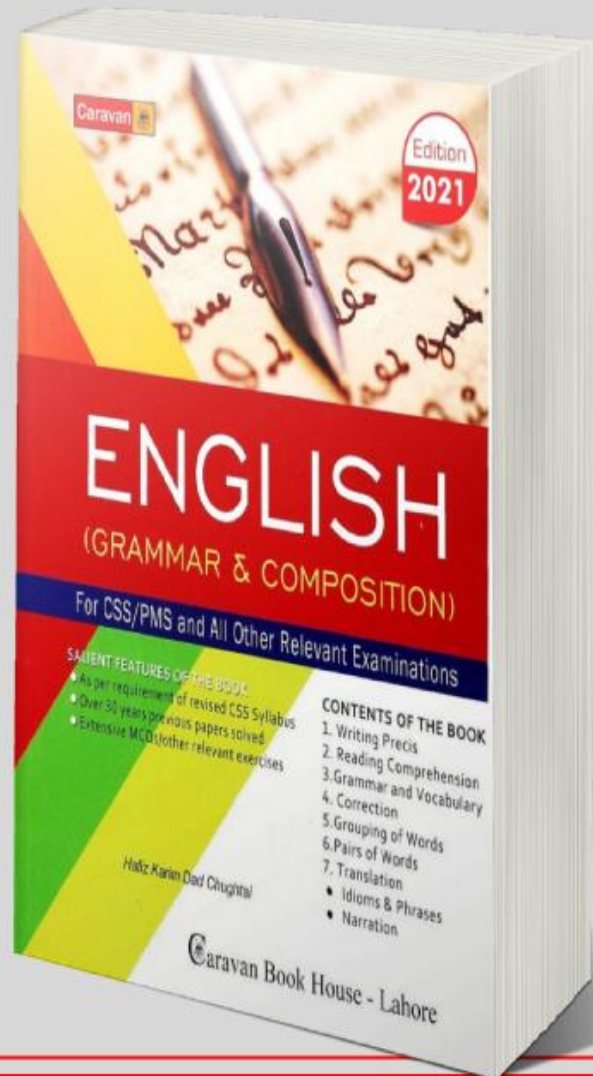
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High Covid numbers

THE picture that is emerging from Covid-19 wards at hospitals in Islamabad, Punjab and KP is deeply distressing. Oxygen beds are filling up fast and some coronavirus patients are being admitted to emergency wards. In the capital, a major hospital is facing serious staff shortage as scores of healthcare workers have tested positive and are either isolating at home or are in quarantine centres. The District Health Office too has sounded the alarm about an increase in Covid-19 hospital admissions and asked both private and state-run-hospitals to build capacity for critical patients. The number of single-day positive cases reported in the capital on Monday is the highest it has ever been since the pandemic began. The NCOC has revealed that 26 cities have a positivity rate higher than 8pc — a reality that is reflected in increased hospitalisations and ventilator use in both Punjab and the capital. On Tuesday, the centre reported the grim figure of 100 Covid-19 deaths in 24 hours.

It is a pity that Pakistan has been plunged into this deadly wave at a point when we know more about the virus and prevention than we did a year ago. Daily new cases are consistently high because for months now, both ordinary people and public office holders have shown carelessness. Ignoring SOPs such as wearing masks and social distancing, both citizens and officials have defied global protocols and even congregated at rallies and mass weddings. In the same period, though many countries were in lockdown, we relished the 'magical' immunity believed to be associated with the lower reported death and case rate here. The result is before us. This week, the government has announced a ban on weddings starting April 5, though why it not doing so at once is confusing. One also hopes that there is no resistance to curbs on large gatherings at mosques and taraweeh prayers during Ramazan, otherwise the threat of infection will only increase. The government must appeal to all sections of the public and create a sense of urgency about Covid-19 SOPs. It must also be unequivocal in its communication and actions to convince people that the virus is a serious public health crisis and will further weaken an already overstretched healthcare sector.

As cases cast a pall of doom, all hope is pinned on the availability of a vaccine. Here, the queue-jumping and out-of-turn procurement of the vaccine by influential politicians is a reprehensible manifestation of privilege that is often

witnessed during times of crisis. The government must ensure that it procures vaccines and makes them available for at-risk members of the population fast. The provinces too, must do their part to engage global manufacturers with a view to supplying the vaccine. Without a widely accessible and efficiently rolled-out vaccine programme, the authorities are robbing people of their right to both safety and freedom.

Exchange of letters

IN the latest act of the Pakistan-India de-escalation process, Prime Minister Imran Khan has written to his Indian counterpart to respond to the latter's Pakistan Day congratulatory letter. "An enabling environment is imperative for ... result-oriented dialogue", Mr Khan wrote, adding that "durable peace and stability in South Asia" required the resolution of all outstanding issues, particularly Jammu and Kashmir.

In the March 23 communication, Narendra Modi had called for "an environment of trust" for better ties, while desiring "cordial relations" with Pakistan. On the surface, there is nothing remarkable in this exchange of pleasantries. However, in the context of the last few years, where bilateral relations have been particularly toxic, these brief exchanges are being viewed as the beginning of a nascent peace process. Expectations, of course, should not be too high. Both the Pakistani and Indian foreign ministers were recently in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to participate in the Heart of Asia meeting. While no bilateral meeting took place, observers noted that both officials avoided combative rhetoric aimed at the other at the conclave. Another major sign that a thaw in relations is underway came on Wednesday, when the Economic Coordination Committee announced that Pakistan would be importing Indian sugar and cotton.

At this point, perhaps the best way to take the peace process forward is to encourage such confidence-building measures as trade, and continue the dialogue process through the backchannel. As mentioned above, bilateral ties have been particularly strained over the past few years, with both states coming to the brink of war in 2019. Undoing this atmosphere of distrust and suspicion will take both time and effort. Along with continuing the dialogue process, hawks on both sides of the fence must be ignored, as they will not want to see the normalisation of relations.

However, it appears that the quarters concerned on both sides may be serious about peace. The prime minister and the army chief have both stressed the need for better bilateral ties, while at the other end the anti-Pakistan rhetoric has been toned down and Mr Modi himself is offering this country peace overtures. There may be several pitfalls along the way and there is a profound difference in the way Islamabad and New Delhi view key issues, particularly the Kashmir dispute. Be that as it may, both states must put in their best efforts to make peace work this time and bring to an end the long-standing tensions.

PWD data

IT emerged during a session of the Sindh Assembly on Monday that the provincial government had done little to collect data for the number of differently abled persons in the province. Although the provincial government has enacted the Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, which was hailed by many as a good step towards the meaningful implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the administration's obvious lethargy in data collection cannot be condoned. The Sindh Assembly was informed that the relevant department was in the process of collecting data of differently abled persons in the province — a piece of information that was shared in response to an MPA's query if the government knew how many women were differently abled in Pakistan. The response came from Minister Mukesh Kumar Chawla, who said that the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities had hired 46 differently abled people but hiring in other departments had come to a halt owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. The lawmakers were told that the provincial government intends to establish vocational training centres for the differently abled, besides asking banks and multinationals to hire more PWD.

Unfortunately, PWD are one of the most marginalised communities in the country. The fact that they are even underrepresented in the census exposes the utterly apathetic attitude of our policymakers towards their plight. According to the 1998 census, PWDs comprised 2.38pc of the population. However, by 2017, the number of PWDs in Pakistan had absurdly dropped by more than 80pc to a mere 0.48pc. Pakistan has been a signatory to the UN convention on PWD rights for more than a decade, but the differently abled still remain on the fringes of the workforce and also public life. Sindh — in fact, all the other provinces as well — must enable the differently abled to be independent and part of the mainstream.

What PWD truly need is society's acceptance and opportunities where they can show their full potential.

Eurobond transaction

PAKISTAN has successfully sold a fresh debt of \$2.5bn to international investors in what analysts had been describing as a significant investor-sentiment test, days after the IMF announced the resumption of its lending to the country under its \$6bn programme.

The 39-month loan signed in July 2019 was suspended almost a year ago. The Eurobond plan had been on the cards for the last one year but was postponed because of the Covid-19 crisis and the suspension of the IMF programme over differences between the government and the Fund on electricity prices, the central bank's autonomy and other issues. It is for the first time that Pakistan has raised funds through global markets after issuing \$2.5bn of securities in 2017.

The money will be used to shore up the country's meagre forex reserves and repay the maturing loans of \$2bn in October this year and December 2022. The government's decision to issue the new Eurobond debt has had a positive impact on the exchange rate, with the rupee having appreciated by more than 4pc against the dollar during the last three months. According to a report, Pakistan's total global capital market debt stock, including the fresh debt, stands at \$7.8bn.

Read: When it comes to the economy, the govt has reacted to circumstances instead of pursuing clear objectives

That the three-tranche note was oversubscribed in spite of the country's poor international credit rating underlines the appetite of investors and fund managers for a reasonably priced sovereign debt. While some may argue that there could have been a better deal had the government launched the dollar bonds earlier, the sale of the five-, 10- and 30-year notes at a yield either lower than or close to the upper end of the indicative prices shows it is not that bad after all. Besides, the benchmark US treasury yields have also been moving upwards and the third wave of the pandemic has accentuated risks all around. The sudden replacement of the veteran finance minister by a younger, inexperienced politician just a day before the issue did not affect investor sentiment or yields. The \$500m 30-year bond yield at 8.875pc against an indicative price of 8.875-9pc may appear a bit

'expensive' but the uncertainties associated with longer-term debts always fetch higher yields. The \$1bn five-year note yields 6pc and the \$1bn 10-year note 7.375pc against the indicative yields of 6.25pc and 7.5pc.

Indeed, the longer-term, market-based debt is a much better option for Pakistan than shorter-term commercial borrowings for balance-of-payments stability and certainty. However, it has to be returned one day. For years, we have been borrowing left, right and centre to repay past loans and pay import bills. This is unsustainable. The semblance of external account stability achieved in recent months should now be used to boost investments in manufacturing in order to produce surpluses for exports for a resolution of our debt and external account troubles.

Gender gap

THE Global Gender Gap Report 2021 brings no glad tidings for Pakistan. Not only is the country still hovering at the bottom of the gender parity index, it has since last year actually slipped a further two notches to 153 out of a total of 156 countries. Only Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan fare worse. That means in the South Asian region it ranks second from last. Looking more closely at the four indices that factor into the final tally, the scorecard places Pakistan at 152 in economic participation and opportunity, 144 in educational attainment, 153 in health and survival, and 98 in political empowerment. In fact, in two indices, economic participation and opportunity, and health and survival, Pakistan figures in the bottom 10 countries. The document's overall assessment is that "progress has stagnated", and that the time needed for Pakistan to close the gender gap is now 136.5 years. The most demoralising aspect is that if seen in terms of historical perspective, not only are we stagnating; we are sliding precipitously. In 2006, Pakistan came in at 112 in the report: that translates into a drop of 41 places in the latest ranking.

Judging by this bleak assessment, the country is doing poorly in one of the main criteria that power the engines of national prosperity. Certainly, there is extensive evidence supporting the view that women in Pakistan get a far smaller share of the pie than their male counterparts. The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these disadvantages. Most women in Pakistan work in the informal sector, where they toil long hours for low pay, no benefits and little job security;

many have found themselves furloughed without pay or laid off as economic activity ground to a virtual standstill. Intimate partner violence rates in the confined home space, with reduced opportunities for 'escape' or outside assistance, have also escalated steeply and affected productivity. Then there is education. Considering the already existing challenges in retaining girls in school beyond primary level, the prolonged school shutdowns will have a hugely detrimental impact. That said, one may well question the quality and comprehensiveness of the data, and the way it is used to arrive at conclusions in the annual gender parity report. For example, the contribution of women in the informal sector goes undocumented; were Pakistan to maintain more accurate data, the country would not rank far below nations where women are perceptibly more disadvantaged.

Cases of dog bite

FOR the Sindh government, the stray dog population and the ensuing cases of dog bites and rabies has proved to be a difficult beast to tackle. Though the provincial administration has taken several steps including culling and sterilisation campaigns and the introduction of helplines, the usual ad hoc and inconsistent approach to the issue has made all these measures largely ineffective. The stray dog population in Karachi and other Sindh cities continues to thrive, and there has been no let-up in the number of dog-bite cases that sometimes lead to rabies. Meanwhile, the shortage of the rabies vaccine and the dilapidated state of public hospitals and dog-bite centres in smaller towns of the province have exacerbated the problem. In 2019 alone, almost 11,000 dog-bite patients were treated at the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre. In January last year, the provincial government finalised a billion-rupee programme for vaccinating stray dogs to control their numbers. According to a report published earlier this week, the Sindh local government secretary said that the provincial rabies control programme had vaccinated more than 30,000 stray dogs in Karachi alone. He said similar measures would be expanded to the rest of the province as well.

However, this initiative followed a gruesome dog-culling campaign in the city in February. The authorities had resorted to shooting stray dogs in certain areas. The two campaigns, less than a month apart and completely opposite in nature, reveal the shortsighted approach of the authorities. Moreover, during a recent

hearing, the additional advocate general had informed the Sindh High Court Sukkur bench that around 110,000 stray dogs had been killed in the province. The ongoing efforts may give some respite in the short term, but for lasting results the provincial government needs to come up with a multipronged approach that includes vaccination of stray dogs, ensuring the supply of rabies vaccine and adequate treatment of dog-bite patients in all public hospitals, combined with a robust advocacy campaign. Only consistent efforts will prove effective in controlling this menace.

Protecting GB's forests

IN its bid to stop illegal logging in the scenic forests of Gilgit-Baltistan, the federal government has deployed Frontier Constabulary personnel to support the regional forest department that is said to lack the manpower, resources and training needed to protect wooded areas. Four FC platoons with 36 members each will be stationed at the GB Forests, Parks and Wildlife Department for at least three years. They are deployed at checkpoints on forest exit routes to stop the smuggling of timber. Reportedly, the FC men also have the authority to apprehend people for felling or transporting trees. Pakistan has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. According to the National Forest Policy, 2015, around 66,700 acres of forests are lost every year mostly in community-owned natural forests. This is mostly because rural communities depend on trees and plants for sustenance in the form of fuel and livelihood. Since the forests in GB are spread over a vast mountainous area comprising hundreds of small and remote valleys, it is difficult for the understaffed regional forest department to keep a check on the felling of trees.

Though local authorities report that the presence of FC men has achieved its purpose — the activities of the timber mafia have drastically reduced while the morale of the forest rangers is said to have improved — it is difficult to view it as a long-term solution to the larger issue of deforestation in the country. The question is, why aren't steps being taken to increase the resources and capacity of the area's forest department? Also, if most of the deforestation occurs for domestic reasons, according to the government's own policy document, then why aren't measures being taken to provide the communities living in the vicinity alternative fuel and livelihoods? Clearly, deforestation is an issue of concern and needs successful stopgap and long-term solutions from the government. In this

instance, the deployment of FC men is a good stopgap arrangement, but not a long-term solution.

U-turn on ECC decision

THE cabinet's reversal of the Economic Coordination Committee decision on imports from India is a bizarre development — one that falls squarely under the unfortunate category of the left hand not knowing what the right is doing. Not only does it betray a lack of coordination within the government, it also points to poor decision-making on a serious matter that requires a sensible and level-headed approach.

A few days ago, at a press conference, Hammad Azhar, the newly appointed finance minister, had indicated that the ECC's decision on trade with India was based on economic factors. The summary moved in this regard was signed by the prime minister himself. The announcement made headlines both at home and in the neighbouring country, and was viewed in the context of the recent de-escalation of hostilities between Pakistan and India that was evident in the LoC ceasefire agreement as well as the speeches delivered by the prime minister and the army chief at the Islamabad Security Dialogue last month. The following day, however, the federal cabinet rejected the same idea, leaving both the nation and the world stunned at this about-turn.

The episode raises several questions, and cannot be shrugged off by ministers. It has caused embarrassment. It points to a faulty system and also creates the impression that the key job of decision-making is conducted in a juvenile manner. The explanations from federal ministers that ECC decisions can be overturned by the cabinet are weak, because they offer no justification for why the finance minister held a press conference to declare this as a matter of fact. Mr Azhar's presser at no point gave the impression that the 'decision' to trade with India was just a proposal under review.

It has now emerged that the foreign minister and some key members of government are against the idea of trading with India until New Delhi reviews its Kashmir policy and rescinds its decision to revoke IHK's special status. While this approach may be in keeping with Pakistan's correct diplomatic messaging on Kashmiris' right to self-determination, it is also true that historically CBMs have been a part of the Pakistan-India equation. The ECC decision may have been

ostensibly about trade, but it would have needed input from all government departments, including the security establishment. Any decision here has long-term consequences not just for our industrial sector but also for perceptions regarding the normalisation of ties.

At the moment, this fiasco is casting a cloud of uncertainty over Mr Khan's leadership skills. As demonstrated by this latest U-turn, communication problems, an inability to make and stick to decisions and poor conflict-resolution skills are becoming the hallmark of this government. The nation deserves to know who is responsible and what action will be taken to avoid such blunders in the future.

Trade deficit

PAKISTAN'S trade deficit nearly doubled to \$2.97bn in March from \$1.5bn a year ago on a major surge in imports, which spiked by 60pc to \$5.3bn, according to data shared by the trade and investment adviser. He said the trade gap expanded owing to increased import of petroleum products, food, machinery, raw materials, chemicals, mobiles, tyres, antibiotics and vaccines. The data shows that export shipments rose by 13.4pc last month from February. According to the consolidated trade data for the period between July and March, the country's trade gap has expanded by 17.8pc to \$20.5bn year-on-year as imports swelled by 12.6pc to \$39.2bn while exports rose by 7pc to \$18.7bn. The trend is likely to continue during the next few months as the government plans to import more sugar, wheat and cotton to meet domestic needs. Going forward, the import of machinery for new and existing projects may further swell the deficit.

The increase in the trade gap was expected as the economy began to recover from the Covid-19 impact and the shortfall in domestic wheat, sugar and cotton production forced the government to import these commodities. In its last monetary policy statement, the State Bank noted: "As the economy recovers the trade deficit is widening somewhat on the back of imports of capital goods and industrial materials as well as food, together with rising international commodity prices." In spite of the widening trade deficit, the external sector outlook for the near term remains stable for now as the central bank expects the current account deficit to stay below 1pc of the size of the economy owing to "record remittances, relatively subdued domestic demand and a nascent recovery in exports". The

resumption of the IMF programme and the successful launch of Eurobonds is expected to further strengthen the external-sector outlook, boost prospects that external financing needs will be comfortably met and shore up foreign exchange reserves. These developments have already started taking pressure off the currency, which has appreciated by around 4pc against the dollar in the last three months. That said, the medium- to long-term external-sector outlook remains frail as non-debt-creating FDI flows remain below the economic potential of the country and the pace of growth in exports is worryingly slow. The situation demands that the government immediately revamp its policies to boost agricultural productivity, support export diversification and attract foreign investment for a stable external sector and sustainable economic growth.

South Punjab province

THE controversy that surrounds the Punjab government's plans regarding the future of an administratively and financially autonomous south Punjab is not likely to go away with the withdrawal of notifications that reportedly rolled back the powers to be devolved to the people of this area. It is likely that the people will increase their focus on each step the provincial PTI government will take to empower, or disempower, the residents of south Punjab through the delegation, or otherwise, of authority to the small bureaucratic set-up created in the name of a separate secretariat. The latter had been regarded as the first step towards a full-fledged south Punjab province. The other day, Chief Minister Usman Buzdar said that "human error" was responsible for the controversial notifications. One notification had "erroneously" taken back the order issued in September to administratively separate the province's three divisions — Multan, Bahawalpur and D.G. Khan — with split secretariats at the divisional headquarters of Multan and Bahawalpur. The other amended the rules of business for south Punjab, limiting the authority of the officers appointed in the south Punjab secretariat. The chief minister also announced the formation of a ministerial committee that is supposed to come up with recommendations for reinforcing the separate administrative set-ups for the southern districts and devolving more functions and departments to improve governance and resolve problems at the local level.

The PTI had won the majority of seats in the national and provincial legislatures from south Punjab in the 2018 elections on the promise of creating a new Janoobi Punjab province. Although it ring-fenced the share of the southern

districts in the provincial development budget in accordance with their population, the administration continues to delay bringing the issue of the new province to the legislature for Punjab's division into two parts. Not only did it take the Buzdar administration two years to set up a separate secretariat for the region, the officers working there have limited powers to take administrative or financial decisions in their jurisdiction. This has led to frustration even within the ranks of the ruling party. Indeed, the division of a province is never easy and requires much political give and take and several changes in the country's constitutional and legal framework. But a fully functional and independent south Punjab secretariat equipped with complete administrative and financial powers could be the first effective step if the intentions are honest.

Opposition split

THE Pakistan Democratic Movement is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. The escalating war of words between its two largest parties, the PML-N and PPP, is rupturing the alliance beyond repair.

On Saturday, PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari taunted his PDM partners again in a press conference. This was perhaps triggered by the decision of the PML-N a day earlier to form a separate bloc of five opposition parties in the Senate, excluding the PPP and ANP. The parliamentary leaders of these parties have also asked PDM chairman Maulana Fazlur Rehman to demand an explanation from the other two parties regarding their conduct in the election of the leader of the opposition in the upper house. The PPP has reacted by saying they too can 'charge-sheet' the PML-N for its conduct.

Had the alliance shown greater maturity and political restraint, it would not have had to face this grim situation. It was always evident that the past would continue to haunt prospects of cooperation between the PML-N and PPP. The level of distrust between the two rivals had built up over the decades. It would have been naïve of anyone to expect that this accumulated reservoir of distrust would dissipate with the formation of the PDM. However, many believed that their common desire to see the back of the PTI government would provide the bond that the alliance needed. It worked well for the first few months but by January, when the hard decisions about the long march and resignations from the

assemblies cropped up, the alliance began to strain at the seams.

For a while it appeared that the PPP's strategy of prioritising the parliamentary over the street option was producing results and the other parties were content to follow its lead, but then suddenly everything began to unravel. It was at this juncture that wise leadership could have saved the day.

Had the leaders of the two parties confined their disagreements to closed-door meetings, and attempted to resolve these differences with a flexible approach, perhaps the alliance could have been saved. The aggressive manner in which both Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari tackled these disputes in full glare of the cameras left reduced any chances of a rapprochement. Whether it was inexperience or ill judgement on part of these young leaders, the end result was the veritable rupturing of the alliance.

The Supreme Court decision on the Daska election, which has gone in favour of the PML-N, may be dulled by the impact of the PDM fracture. The PTI now finds itself in a better position to take advantage of the split in the opposition. For this no one is to blame other than the leadership of the two opposition parties. They cut the branch they were sitting on and now they are paying the price for it.

Pakistan football saga

THE nasty tug-of-war for administrative control of football affairs in Pakistan has brought the sport to the brink of an indefinite suspension by FIFA. An unprecedented chain of events has seen officials of the FIFA-backed PFF Normalisation Committee forced to vacate the PFF headquarters by the rival Ashfaq Group following a vicious attack. FIFA on Tuesday issued a stern warning to the Ashfaq Group that failure to hand the PFF headquarters back to the PFF NC could see Pakistan suspended for the second time in four years. However, the Ashfaq Group has refused to budge and, instead, demanded negotiations with FIFA. A FIFA suspension would see Pakistan miss out on international events, while foreign teams' participation in football competitions of the South Asian Games, scheduled to be hosted by the country in 2023, are likely to be in peril. The recent events add to the long-running crisis that has afflicted football in the country for the better part of the last decade. From the abuse of power and financial and administrative irregularities to court battles, allegations and counter

allegations, Pakistan football has seen it all, barring, of course on-field action that has pushed the national football team to an ignominious 200th spot in international rankings.

It is lamentable, too, how the government has been a mere bystander in the saga. In spite of the capture of the PFF headquarters, all that the government has done is to ask FIFA to open a fresh dialogue with football officials in Pakistan, claiming that suspension isn't the way forward. Regrettably, the history of sports in Pakistan is replete with incidents of political appointments of officials whose arbitrary dealings have greatly damaged the development of a variety of sports in the country. The other big menace are the parallel bodies formed by vested interests who eventually leave things in a mess. Such practices must be done away with to ensure a better future for our sportsmen and sportswomen.

Vaccine elitism

THE culture of entitlement prevalent in this society appears to have wavered not a whit even during a national health crisis. Reports have surfaced that 1,400 vaccine doses at three government hospitals in Lahore — Mayo, Services and Mozang — have allegedly either gone 'missing' or 'been administered to unauthorised persons', while many vials have spoiled. In Mozang Teaching hospital, 350 doses of the vaccine were spoiled allegedly because of improper storage, for which the medical superintendent has been suspended for "extreme inefficiency". The vaccines in the three hospitals had been provided for inoculating health professionals, many of whom are still awaiting their turn. Several reports have also emerged on social media of celebrities and politicians' families getting vaccinated out of turn against Covid-19. Many have been brazen enough to post videos of themselves getting the jab.

However, this is not to say that people who are eligible for the shots, including health professionals and citizens over 60 years of age, are signing up for them in droves. Registration, which has recently opened for those 50 years and over, has been sluggish and only a miniscule percentage of those eligible for inoculation are on course to receive it. So far, only 0.8m doses of the vaccine have been administered. Last week, Pakistan received its first two consignments of purchased vaccine totalling a million doses. According to government authorities,

orders for millions more will be finalised in the coming months. That is reassuring, but an effective campaign to motivate people to get themselves inoculated is sorely needed. Too many are still sitting on the fence, inclined to risk infection rather than trust science. That Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Arif Alvi were diagnosed with Covid-19 after their first doses of the vaccine is unfortunate. Vaccine sceptics are likely to see it as ‘evidence’ of the medication’s ‘inefficacy’. Such misinformation must be robustly countered with facts; it takes up to two weeks after receiving the second jab for immunity to kick in.

The third wave of Covid-19 is tearing across the country, especially in Punjab and KP, making it all the more essential for the vaccination campaign to gain traction. In most urban centres, aside from Karachi, the positivity rate is well over 10pc; last week, it was 17pc in Lahore and 15pc in Rawalpindi and Faisalabad. On Saturday, out of 55,605 tests conducted, 5,020 people tested positive, the second highest figure this year. Eighty-one patients succumbed to the disease. Given these frightening statistics — that have resulted in the UK placing Pakistan on a ‘red list’ — restrictions in most provinces have been further tightened. Where masks in public places are mandated, fines should be imposed on the spot so that people realise they have no choice but to take the SOPs seriously. Only by collective action can we win this battle.

Rules under review

AT last, Attorney General Khalid Jawed Khan’s assurance to the Islamabad High Court in January, that the government is prepared to review the controversial Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2020, has been fulfilled — in part. An inter-ministerial committee has been formed following the AG’s recommendation to the prime minister that “further and broad based consultations were required for framing of comprehensive rules for regulation of social media which protect the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and right to information as envisaged under Articles 19 and 19-A ... while also ensuring that social media platforms are not abused and material is not disseminated in violation of laws”. It is to submit a report of its recommendations within 30 days. Perhaps with the human rights minister at the helm of the review committee, Pakistanis can hope for a better outcome — one that is premised on upholding the rights of citizens over arbitrary and excessive

expansion of the powers of the state. Indeed, the attorney general admitting that it was a mistake to not involve relevant stakeholders in the process is a welcome acknowledgement. However, there are still valid reasons to remain wary.

For one, according to Media Matters for Democracy, the petitioners who are challenging the constitutionality of the rules in court objected in a hearing on April 1 to the 'one-sided' composition of the review committee. While the government has given assurances that all stakeholders' feedback will be taken into account, we have heard this many times before, from both the incumbent and previous government — and consistently been let down. Last year's 'consultative' processes on the new rules amounted to eyewash. Including relevant stakeholder representatives within the committee itself can help to repair damaged trust and lend the process much-needed legitimacy. Even more critically, however, is that any meaningful consultation would lead to only one logical conclusion, one that has been voiced repeatedly by rights groups and digital experts — that Pakistan's current digital governance structure is fundamentally antithetical to a free and open internet in which citizens' rights are affirmed and digital innovation and commerce are allowed to flourish. Addressing this would require not only scrapping the new rules in their entirety, but drastically overhauling the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. Is the government prepared to listen to its people and see such a process through?

Saudi FM on Israel

WHEN a number of Arab countries — led by the UAE — established ties with Israel last year under the so-called Abraham Accords, the million-dollar question was (and remains) when Riyadh would establish links with Tel Aviv.

There has been speculation in the media regarding secret meetings, with one report saying that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the northern Saudi region of Neom last November. Riyadh flatly denied the meeting took place, though Saudi officials, including the all-powerful crown prince, have softened their tone towards the Jewish state. In the latest indication that attitudes are changing, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan recently told CNN that normalisation with Israel would bring "tremendous benefit to the region". In the same breath he added that

Saudi-Israel ties depended on the establishment of a Palestinian state — Riyadh's standard line.

Clearly, efforts are afoot to establish ties, yet the 'thorny' question of Palestine and its people stands in the way. The fact is that there are quite a few common denominators between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Primarily, they are both members of the US-led geopolitical bloc, while both states share great animus towards Iran — a feeling reciprocated by the Islamic Republic. However, while it was relatively easy for the UAE and Bahrain to make public their ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia faces a tougher challenge, as it hosts Islam's holiest sites. Therefore, if it openly courts Israel, it will be seen as 'betraying' the Palestine cause.

The fact is that the Arab states that have rushed to establish ties with Israel had already ditched Palestine. The peace process is practically dead while the two-state solution is in intensive care, repeatedly battered by a rapacious and unforgiving Israeli establishment that is unwilling to see a viable Palestinian state, non-starters like Donald Trump's 'deal of the century' notwithstanding. In such a scenario, any Muslim state that establishes relations with Israel has pretty much abandoned Palestine.

Electoral reforms

FEDERAL Minister Fawad Chaudhry has once again asked the opposition to cooperate with the government in order to bring about electoral reforms. He highlighted the importance of electoral reforms by saying that only by implementing them could the next elections be held in a free and fair manner so that the winner can form the next government. Speaking to the media in Lahore, the minister also reiterated that the judicial system is in a shambles and needs reforms. He argued that such reform in the judicial system can only happen if the government, the opposition and the judiciary sit together. He then emphasised that the ECP also requires reforms as was evidenced by the fact that the Senate elections as well as the Daska by-elections were marred by controversy.

The minister has a point. One of the biggest failures of Pakistan's political system is its inability to hold credible and transparent elections. There are multiple reasons for this failure, including the heavy interference of the establishment, but the most important factor is that political parties have not been able to forge a

consensus on the reforms required to safeguard against electoral malpractice. This in turn is a by-product of the acute polarisation that has become a hallmark of the country's politics. This dangerously volatile partisanship — which often plays out at the expense of a functional relationship — is possibly the biggest hurdle that stops political stakeholders from sitting across the table and getting the work of such reforms done. It is now easy for Mr Chaudhry and his party to argue for these reforms, but the PTI conveniently forgets that it is primarily responsible for vitiating the atmosphere both inside and outside parliament. It is also a bit rich of Mr Chaudhry to claim the high moral ground on electoral reforms when he and his colleagues only a few weeks back were sitting in Daska and defending the disgraced election.

If the government is serious about initiating these reforms, and is not playing to the gallery as it has done so far, then its ministers need to move beyond press statements and initiate contact with the opposition through proper parliamentary channels. PTI leaders should realise that governments carry the responsibility of engaging the opposition in parliamentary business, and doing so requires climbing down from the high horse that PTI believes it has been riding on. Senior members from the treasury benches therefore need to make a concerted effort — sans insults and taunts — to convince the opposition to start a formal exercise of reviewing all electoral laws and aiming to reform them by consensus. This is necessary to ensure that the next general elections carry the stamp of approval from all political stakeholders. There is time available to get this task done if the government can display the seriousness that is so far missing.

Ghani's proposal

AS questions swirl over whether or not the US will honour its commitment to withdraw foreign troops from Afghanistan by May 1, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has reportedly readied a new plan to salvage the peace process. The Afghan leader's three-step process is designed to incrementally bring down violence and spur the political process. As per details available in the media, the first step envisages a ceasefire and a political settlement; a presidential election and "government of peace" are part of step two; while building a "constitutional framework" for the war-torn country is the third and final step. As the Afghan Taliban — the primary foes of the government in Kabul — are wary of any 'foreign' initiatives, this peace plan may have more potential for success. The US,

which backs Afghanistan's government, is hoping some sort of deal will be reached by the Taliban and the Kabul administration at a peace conference due to take place in Turkey later this month. Meanwhile, it appears more and more difficult that Washington will ensure all foreign forces are out of Afghanistan by the beginning of May, though some say the Taliban may promise to halt attacks if the deadline is in fact extended.

Indeed, the sooner the foreign forces leave Afghanistan and let the Afghans decide their own destiny, the better it will be. However, this must be an orderly process and the US and its allies cannot just cut and run, much like the Soviets did at the end of the Afghan 'jihad'. While the US and the Taliban had signed a peace accord in Doha last year — under which the May 1 deadline has been set — there has been no corresponding agreement among the Afghan stakeholders. The Ghani peace plan and the meeting in Turkey offer a chance for the Afghans themselves to reach an agreement. The Taliban should take advantage of the situation, and instead of dismissing the Kabul administration as foreign 'puppets' they must engage with it to forge a way out of the decades-long crisis that has ravaged Afghanistan. If the Taliban remain obdurate, the cycle of violence will continue, worsening the misery of the Afghan people. The Afghan government must assure all stakeholders that the peace process will pave the way for free and fair elections that will empower all Afghan tribes and ethnic and religious groups. If all sides show flexibility, Afghanistan's long nightmare could end soon.

Controversial view

THE myth that a woman's clothing is somehow linked to the sexual violence against her has long been debunked, but it seems the prime minister still harbours this problematic view. During a telethon where members of the public were invited to ask him questions, Imran Khan's response to one caller was unsettling. Though Mr Khan denounced crimes against women and children, his explanation that sexual violence is somehow a product of 'obscenity' — which he described as a Western and an Indian import — betrayed an ill-informed understanding of a very serious issue.

Not only did Mr Khan say that the pervasiveness of obscene behaviour has contributed to these crimes, he also implied that they can somehow be prevented if women observe purdah. In his words, purdah would lessen the temptation of

those who lack willpower. While he noted that society would have to evolve to better protect its women and children, his point appeared to be more about limiting government responsibility than reforming male behaviour. Mr Khan's views on this subject are shockingly insensitive and even harmful to the women's movement in the country.

Read: In Pakistan, rape culture is not only systemic, it is reinforced at every level

If the holder of the country's highest office is framing the narrative of sexual violence in a way that places the responsibility of 'doing more' on women, it gives little hope that common citizens will espouse a broader and less misogynistic approach. If the prime minister had engaged with rights activists in the country to really understand women's grievances, he would instantly comprehend that this mentality of equating rape with a lack of 'modesty' is the very manifestation of victim-blaming that women fight against.

Blaming the increasing incidence of rape on Western influence is convenient, but Mr Khan should not forget that women in the countries he blames for obscenity and high divorce rates have better protections and more freedoms than women in Pakistan. He should understand the basics of women empowerment, and acknowledge that imposing a solution is no support; the government must protect women regardless of their choices

Water shortages

IRSA will meet tomorrow to address the issue of distribution of irrigation water — or rather its shortage — among the provinces for the kharif season. With 12pc to 19pc shortages anticipated this summer against the provisions of the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord, the total amount of water likely to be available for distribution is expected to be in the vicinity of 65 MAF and 68 MAF. But before distributing water, Irsa will have to tackle two critical issues. First, Punjab believes that the system losses for the early kharif season (April 1-June 10) would be nearly 20pc — and not 35pc — unless 'justified' through a professional study or Irsa's technical consensus. Second, the bigger challenge would be the demand from Wapda to fix 1,470 feet as the water conservation level at Tarbela against its maximum conservation level of 1,550 feet until June 10 in view of ongoing development works at its two power stations. It is hoped that the

authority will develop a consensus on these challenges without much difficulty as these issues aren't new for Irsa.

Ever since the water accord was finalised, water stress has intensified and its availability for the kharif and rabi seasons has come to be defined more by shortage than abundance. In fact, since the accord, the demand for kharif crops has never entirely been met. The annual availability of water for summer crops has averaged 14pc less than what is envisioned in the accord because of lack of sufficient water storage and climate change. As a result, we have seen provinces accusing each other of stealing water from their respective shares and Irsa blaming them for theft and misreporting. The situation gets worse each year with a seasonal deficit of 4pc to 28pc because of climate change. The winter shortages are even higher. The water stress is anticipated to increase going forward. The emerging situation calls for urgently building new storages to trap floodwaters, as well as incentivising farmers to adopt modern irrigation technologies so that they can achieve better yields while conserving the depleting resource.

Policy shift?

THIS is one U-turn that has been much needed. On Monday, while presiding over a meeting of his spokespersons in Islamabad, Prime Minister Imran Khan instructed them to refrain from criticising the opposition in the media and instead highlight the government's achievements. Further, he termed the opposition as "harmless", saying they "did not matter" any longer.

The change in tack comes across as a major policy shift, considering that Mr Khan has made the excoriation of previous governments the hallmark of his tenure. He has repeatedly denounced opposition leaders as "looters of the national wealth" who are responsible for Pakistan's economic woes. That uncompromisingly one-track narrative has been echoed by many federal ministers and advisers in a seemingly endless loop. As a result, government-opposition relations are perennially hostile, and political rhetoric rather than governance has taken centre stage.

Consider it took months before three dozen plus standing committees — that are necessary for legislative work — could be constituted, a task that according to the National Assembly's rules of procedure must be completed within 30 days of

the leader of the house being elected. The PTI's needlessly combative stance never let up enough to allow for a working relationship across the aisle.

The statement on Monday by the prime minister is the first clear sign of a recalibration in strategy. Increasing public discontent, Yousuf Raza Gilani's unexpected victory over the then finance minister Hafeez Sheikh in the Senate election; the threat of the PDM's mass resignations and long march; and the perception that the much-vaunted 'one page' was showing signs of wear and tear may have forced a rethink. Certainly, with the election of his candidate as Senate chairman and the implosion of the PDM, Mr Khan has seen off the latest challenge to his government, at least for the moment. But, after nearly three years of ignoring advice to climb down from the 'container mode' of his dharna days, the premier may have realised that beating the drum about the previous governments' failures so far into his tenure was becoming untenable. In fact, the law of diminishing returns had kicked in a long time ago.

The rift in the PDM has lowered the political temperature — and no doubt anxiety levels in government corridors — at a time when the treasury benches need to engage with the opposition. The judicial and electoral reforms the government has proposed can only be carried out through dialogue with legislators as a whole, not just those belonging to PTI or its allied parties. Nevertheless, knowing the prime minister's predilection for self-righteousness and mercurial about-turns, it is difficult to gauge whether the political rhetoric will be dialled down for long. What is certain is that far-sighted leaders concentrate on the work the nation has entrusted them with rather than pursuing a barren policy of harking to the past.

The 'disappeared'

OUTSIDE the Quaid's mausoleum, under the blazing Karachi sun, a sorry sight awaits passers-by: since last Friday, families of Shia missing persons, including toddlers and the elderly, have set up a protest camp to demand that the state provide them with details about their loved ones and return them without delay. However, at the time of writing, their demands remained unfulfilled. Some men have been 'missing' for up to a decade, as families struggle to find answers. Unfortunately, this latest protest proves that the scourge of enforced disappearances in Pakistan is very much alive. As these and other protesters have demanded of the state, if their loved ones are accused of breaking any of

the country's laws, they should be produced in court so that they can properly defend themselves. Sadly this logic has failed to convince the quarters concerned about the 'missing' who include Sindhi and Baloch nationalists, members of the Shia community as well as those believed to be harbouring sympathies for religious outfits, armed and otherwise.

The courts have stepped in to remind the state of its duties, and citizens' constitutional rights. For example, while hearing a case last month, a Sindh High Court bench censured the federal government, saying the centre was taking little interest in the cases of missing persons, and added that no legislation had been passed against enforced disappearances. The Islamabad High Court had also slapped a Rs10m fine on the authorities for failing to trace the whereabouts of a missing man. However, even the protestations of the courts seem to have had little effect where ending the disgraceful practice of enforced disappearances is concerned. As mentioned above, if the authorities believe someone is guilty of a crime, they should be booked and tried in a transparent manner. Whisking people away and keeping them incarcerated without charge is not only a flagrant violation of human rights, it also does not serve the ends of justice. Instead of strengthening national security, 'disappearing' people actually alienates the public from the state and its institutions. The prime minister must take notice of all cases of enforced disappearances and provide answers to the family members of missing persons. Moreover, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances must play a more proactive role in tracing the disappeared, and hold to account those who have unlawfully detained citizens. If Pakistan is to become a true welfare state, there can be no room for such illegal abductions.

Exam predicament

THE government's decision to halt physical lessons from grades 1 to 8 till April 28, but to resume classes and exams from grades 9 to 12 from April 12 has irked millions of students across the country. The students have spent a good part of their academic year at home. Although a large number of schools arranged for online classes, many students could not avail this facility due to a number of factors ranging from limited access to devices such as smartphones and laptops to unstable internet and electricity connections. In May 2020, the federal government decided to promote students on their year-round performance. Schools were reopened under a phased plan in January 2021, with classes at

most educational institutions being held at half strength on alternate days. However, with the country now struck hard by a third wave of devastating infections, the decision to go ahead with Matric, Inter and O-/A-level board exams appears rash. Recent studies show that the new Covid-19 strain is affecting more children than before, while the country's positivity rate is nearly 10pc, and even higher in some of the most affected cities. The decision then to continue with classes and exams is risky and could endanger the health of thousands of young people in the country. Indeed, several countries including Bangladesh, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have cancelled O-/A-level exams.

Surely, the authorities could have repeated last year's exercise with some improvements and thus avoided putting a large number of students in harm's way. While the Cambridge authorities have said that all SOPs will be followed, are our education departments confident that this will be the case during Matric and Inter exams, which are often held in dilapidated government schools without electricity and adequate seating arrangements? Moreover, how will fair assessment be ensured when a large number of students have not been able to complete the required coursework owing to intermittent disruptions in their schooling arrangements? It would be wise to review this decision.

IMF forecast

THE IMF's new forecast of a subdued economic growth rate of 1.5pc for Pakistan in the current fiscal represents an upgrade from its October estimate of 1pc. Still, it is consistent with the lender's previous view of the economy in the Covid-19 landscape. The new projection is in line with the World Bank's revised forecast of 1.3pc given in its Pakistan Development Update published simultaneously with the IMF's World Economic Review.

Nonetheless, it falls shy of the government's growth target of 2.1pc in addition to being far less optimistic than the State Bank's latest recovery estimate of 3pc. Last year, the economy had contracted by 0.4pc during the pandemic. Their different figures for growth notwithstanding, SBP and IMF seem to have a similar outlook on other macroeconomic aspects: fiscal balance, inflation and current account deficit. The global lender also expects growth to pick up next year, projecting the economy to expand by 4pc, with inflation slowing down slightly and the current account deficit widening marginally. The medium-term outlook up to

2026 sees relatively steady economic expansion with a stable external sector but higher inflation.

The World Bank has drawn a slightly bleaker picture of the economy and the impact of the virus on people and jobs — “...economic activity is projected to be dampened in the short term by the fiscal consolidation measures associated with the resumption of the IMF stabilisation programme as the economy regains its footing”, it says. The bank expects economic growth to recover slowly given the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic, including the emergence of new strains. The World Bank also points to increased poverty, jobs and food insecurity owing to the impact of the virus on vulnerable segments of the population.

The recent changes in the top ranks of the government’s finance team show that the country’s political leadership is worried about slower recovery in a high-inflation environment. The reconstitution of the ‘advisory council’ and the inclusion of pro-growth businessmen and experts in it reflects a desire to change course from economic stabilisation to growth in order to lessen the devastating effects of the health crisis on the economy and job creation, and to find fiscal space to help vulnerable groups as the current wave threatens to derail the fragile recovery seen since last summer.

Prime Minister Imran Khan plans to approach the IMF for relaxation in its loan conditions as he sees disruptions in the near future on account of the infection’s resurgence. Indeed, the government is in a difficult position: it cannot grow the economy rapidly or help businesses if it has to implement harsh IMF stabilisation policies. Nor can it ditch the programme without sending wrong signals internationally. The only way out is to convince the Fund to soften its conditions for the remaining period of the loan to provide the government with room to pursue pro-growth strategies.

Police shake-up

AN unprecedented move has been made to weed out corrupt cops in Punjab. On the provincial IGP’s instructions, 61 SHOs with ‘tainted records’ have been suspended from service and removed from their posts. Most of the personnel concerned were posted in Faisalabad, Lahore, Sheikhpura and Kasur.

In an official letter to senior police officials across the province, the IG had ordered that SHOs who had been challaned in criminal cases be removed while those against whom criminal cases were registered should be suspended. Further, he said, SHOs who had been awarded three or more major departmental punishments should be transferred within the next 48 hours and not appointed as SHOs in future.

There has been some opposition from within the police to this course of action. A report in this paper quoted some cops describing the move as a “gimmick”; they have questioned why the action was limited to SHOs rather than being applied across the board from the constable to the IG level.

According to them, many senior officials too have far from pristine service records. Some cops have complained that police are also falsely implicated in criminal cases on political grounds or by local pressure groups. These concerns may be valid to a certain extent, and a departmental inquiry into the affected cops’ alleged criminal records should be undertaken, but at least a beginning has been made.

Punjab’s notorious thana culture has been sent a message that it is no longer business as usual where law-abiding citizens often have reason to fear approaching law-enforcement. Police stations in Punjab — although other provinces, especially Sindh, are not much better — under the direct command of the SHO concerned, have an appalling record of torture in custody (sometimes resulting in the detainee’s death), bribery, fake encounters, etc.

However, until an effective public complaints mechanism is set up, the yawning trust deficit between citizens and police for reasons mentioned earlier will be impossible to bridge. People have suffered for too long at the hands of an unaccountable police drunk on their own power. A few dozen suspensions/dismissals of SHOs are not enough to stem the rot.

Depoliticisation of the police is another critical requirement for improving its performance. The fact is, the thana culture does not exist in isolation: it is enabled by political interference in police transfers and postings. The cops know whom they are serving — and far too often, it is not the people.

Improving ties with Russia

RUSSIAN Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov struck the right tone during his visit to Pakistan. In a press conference along with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Mr Lavrov said Russia was ready to promote bilateral cooperation with Pakistan in diverse fields including economy, trade and defence. The importance of his visit can be gauged from the fact that it is after nearly a decade that the top diplomat of Russia has made a trip to Pakistan. In the last 15 years or so, both countries have made a concerted effort to improve ties and establish solid grounds for building a stronger and mutually beneficial relationship for the years ahead. The present times accord a good opportunity to undertake such an endeavour. Pakistan's foreign policy is aligned with regional realities. In a strategically vital neighbourhood, Pakistan is well placed to leverage its ties with key countries in order to effectively pursue its national interests. Pakistan is doing well to avoid the label of being in any one camp and it is important that it is recognised as a regional player that is on good terms with major powers such as China, the US and Russia. While Russia retains a global reach in its policy, it is one of the most influential countries in our region and Mr Qureshi was right when he said that Russia is a factor of stability in the region. This makes Pakistan's ties with Russia crucial from all aspects.

Pakistan has genuine policy interests in Afghanistan, India, Iran and the Middle East. Russia wields significant influence in all these spheres. Pakistan has been gradually investing in this relationship in recent years and the Russian foreign minister's productive visit appears to be one of the dividends of this diplomatic investment. However, the real challenge for Islamabad is to translate this improved relationship into tangible projects. The key project that requires Pakistan's highest priority is the North-South gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore. Prime Minister Imran Khan also highlighted the importance of this joint Pakistan-Russia project in his meeting with Mr Lavrov. In addition, Russia has also shown an interest in the Steel Mill which in fact had been initially set up by the USSR. Pakistan can benefit from this renewed interest from Moscow.

Mr Lavrov also assured his counterpart that Russia would be sending more Sputnik vaccine to Pakistan and this is a welcome gesture as vaccines are not easy to come by in the international market. Similarly, defence cooperation is a key area. It was announced that Russia would provide more counterterrorism

equipment to Pakistan which is perhaps an acknowledgement of Pakistan's success in this area. Five rounds of Pakistan-Russia military exercises have already taken place. Pakistan-Russia ties are on an upward trajectory and it is important that Islamabad put greater effort into strengthening them even further.

Forces' criticism bill

IN a country where free speech is increasingly facing restrictions, a National Assembly panel's approval of a bill that seeks to criminalise criticism of the armed forces is bound to generate further misgivings. The bill, which has the endorsement of the interior ministry, was introduced by PTI lawmakers as a response to the growing criticism of the armed forces, some members of which have come under public scrutiny for their alleged interference in matters of governance.

There is no doubt that this nation takes immense pride in its armed forces for their courage in defending the country's borders and recognises the tremendous sacrifices they have made in the war against terrorism. In fact, the successful military operations that eradicated terrorists from northern Pakistan have been especially lauded. However, no one is above criticism, including the senior leadership of our security apparatus — this includes those perceived as going beyond their scope of responsibilities.

Since its inception, the country has seen repeated military interventions, the abrogation or suspension of the Constitution, the dismissal of elected parliaments, and the incarceration of political leaders — actions that have been overseen by the defence establishment. It is also no secret that there are occasions where senior commanders have been perceived as indirectly interfering in civilian matters — a reality which did not escape the army chief himself when intelligence officials held police hostage in Karachi last year. The intelligence apparatus, too, has often been accused of unconstitutional behaviour, such as the enforced disappearance of activists.

Given this reality, the move to bring in such legislation sends the wrong message. It would give cause for some to say that the very goal here is to prevent legitimate criticism by opposition politicians and rights groups that have questioned the role of the army in civilian affairs. It would also give weight to the argument that the present dispensation is a hybrid regime. This bill will

criminalise legitimate questions about the military's alleged interference in civilian matters — questions which in a country like Pakistan are necessary as the fear of derailment of the democratic project is ever-present.

Freedom to question here does not mean that the military's role in defending the country is being doubted. It simply gives people their constitutional right to question the alleged involvement of an institution of the state in affairs that are beyond its constitutional mandate. In the interest of democracy, parliament must ensure that this bill is either abandoned or rejected.

ODI series triumph

WEDNESDAY'S victory over South Africa at Centurion has brought Pakistan a much-awaited overseas ODI series triumph, while the return to form of opener Fakhar Zaman augurs well for the team in future assignments. Since 2019, Pakistan has had a rough ride on away tours in which they have tasted defeat in Tests as well as ODIs and T20 games in Australia, England and New Zealand. However, the back-to-back Test and T20 series wins at home against South Africa earlier this year boosted the players' morale as was evident this week. For once, Babar Azam's men looked happy and prepared as they took the field for the ODI series which they won 2-1 against South Africa. Thankfully, there were no Covid-19 cases to haunt them this time, as there were during the New Zealand tour last year which got off to a disastrous start with as many as 10 cases being reported.

It was also good to see the top order performing well for a change. Fakhar, Imam-ul-Haq, skipper Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan all displayed their prowess with the bat in the three-match series. Fakhar's twin hundreds, though, were the cornerstone of Pakistan's win. The fact that Pakistan crossed the 300-run mark in two of the three games should give them heart and raise hopes of a strong combination being finalised for the T20 World Cup in India, scheduled in October. Having said that, the lacklustre show by the bowlers remains an area of concern for bowling coach Waqar Younis and the team management. The young pace trio comprising Shaheen Shah Afridi, Haris Rauf and Mohammad Hasnain went for runs at crucial stages of the game which was not a pretty sight at all. It remains a mystery, too, why Pakistan resisted playing a spinner in the opening two games since South Africa are weak when they face spin bowling. Hopefully,

skipper Babar and head coach Misbah-ul-Haq will analyse matters to field a formidable playing eleven in the four-match T20 series that begins on Saturday.

IS in Mozambique

IT was not too long ago when the dreaded shock troops of the self-declared Islamic State group were rampaging through Iraq and Syria, leaving a bloody trail of death and destruction in their wake. It took the collective efforts of several nations to defeat IS and bring a semblance of normalcy to the region. However, less organised but equally deadly ‘chapters’ of the jihadist franchise have sprung up in various other regions of the world, including Afghanistan, Yemen and parts of Africa. In a recent episode in the African country of Mozambique, the local IS affiliate once again proved that if this band of bloodthirsty militants is allowed to organise anywhere in the world, chaos and disorder are likely to follow. Active in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province, the terrorists have murdered a large number of people in the gas-rich region, with at least a dozen beheaded earlier this week. While the militants call themselves Al Shabab, they are not to be confused with a similar terrorist outfit active in Somalia.

Experts familiar with the situation in Mozambique are of the view that pre-existing problems in the region have aided the rise of militants. The area they are active in is rich in hydrocarbon wealth, but little of this has reached the local population. Using the disaffection to their advantage, the local IS fighters have taken on the Mozambican state with intense ferocity. In the short term, the terrorist threat must be nipped in the bud before it transforms into an uncontrollable ogre. The lessons from Syria and Iraq must not be forgotten, and complacency is not a viable option in this situation. In the longer term, Mozambique must address the socioeconomic problems that have allowed IS to establish a foothold in the country. As experiences elsewhere have shown, a successful counterterrorism strategy needs governments to defeat such armed actors before they can challenge the state, as well as a deeper understanding of the underlying causes that feed militancy.

Greater tax burden

THE FBR's tax target of Rs6tr for the next year under the IMF-mandated fiscal adjustment policies will increase the income tax burden on salaried individuals, expand the scope of consumption tax and see the withdrawal of certain tax exemptions, besides raising electricity and petroleum products' prices. The new revenue mobilisation measures will unleash another round of inflation while further squeezing purchasing power. In order to meet its other payment obligations such as debt servicing and recurrent expenditure like the defence budget, the government would have to reduce development spending, which would hamper job creation among other things. The government's commitments to the IMF for resumption of the loan suggests that next year's projected tax collection is 27pc or Rs1.3tr higher than the current fiscal's revised target. This means people will pay the FBR an additional Rs570bn in 2021-22 owing to changes in income tax and GST. Likewise, they will pay almost Rs160bn more as petroleum levy in addition to picking up the burden of withdrawal of exemptions to businesses and increased taxes on imports.

The PTI government has assured the IMF of its commitment to "broadening the tax base and gradually increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio by more than 3pc of GDP through FY2023, with a cumulative fiscal policy adjustment of 3.3pc of GDP". The details of the agreement were revealed days after the World Bank's Pakistan Development Update drew a bleak picture of the medium-term economic growth outlook and brought the focus back on surging poverty and rising unemployment in the midst of Covid-19. The day the report was released, the prime minister too had underlined the implications of the IMF-mandated adjustments on economic growth, businesses, poverty and jobs, saying that he intended to approach the Fund for softening its loan conditions. A few days earlier he had sacked his finance minister for agreeing to stringent IMF conditions.

A report quoted the IMF mission chief in Pakistan as saying the "programme requires significant revenue efforts from the beginning as there is little room on the expenditure side". That may be so but it does not justify the new burden on ordinary people who have lost jobs or seen their real incomes shrink significantly in these times. Unfortunately, honest taxpayers and consumers are being punished for the government's failure to revamp the corrupt tax machinery and collapsing power sector. Most tax revenue measures will affect the poor to

middle-income groups — directly or indirectly — while the wealthy will continue to get massive subsidies and tax relief in the name of providing jobs and homes to them. For many, the IMF has become a part of the problem by emphasising higher revenue collection rather than stressing the need for broadening the net for boosting tax collection and structural reforms. By letting the government get away with its failure on reforms, the Fund is only helping it widen income inequality in the country.

UK travel ban

THE UK's decision to impose restrictions on travellers from Pakistan has no doubt come as a blow to British Pakistanis who will face considerable hurdles if they wish to travel between the two countries to visit their families. Not only do returning British residents from Pakistan have to now quarantine for 10 days at a hotel, they must also pay almost £2,000 for the stay and mandatory Covid-19 tests.

For many British Pakistanis, this sum, plus the skyrocketing ticket price, means that travel plans during Eid and Ramazan will have to be postponed. However, to assist returning passengers who hope to make it to the UK before the ban takes effect, PIA through charter flights has done a commendable job.

British MPs from constituencies that have many Pakistani voters have demanded an explanation for why Pakistan is on the red list when many other countries are not. It is a fair question, as some European countries have far higher rates of infection and have yet escaped the restriction. Though Britain had restricted all but essential travel, British Pakistanis were travelling to Pakistan and back, with some reports suggesting that many of them were testing positive on arrival in the UK. While some may justifiably feel that the ban is about politics, the fact is that cases in Pakistan are increasingly rapidly. The irony is that the high transmission rate has been linked to the spread of the B.1.1.7 variant, or the 'UK strain' that was brought into the country by travellers.

Here, the question of why the government did not impose quarantine rules on travellers flying into the country from the UK must be raised. Although many countries closed their door on the UK when the fast-spreading and more lethal strain was identified, Pakistan continued to allow passengers to arrive without quarantine requirements. While the passengers departing from the UK had to

show a negative PCR test before boarding a flight to Pakistan, these tests include self-administered home tests that might not have been done correctly. There is also the possibility that the passengers could have contracted the virus after they were tested — something that ought to have been considered by Pakistani government officials at the helm of the Covid-19 response. A far cry from the start of the pandemic, when the government enforced a sound quarantine strategy for incoming travellers, today the response to those who might be bringing in mutations is lacking. The strategy must be revisited.

Dissension within PTI

WITH the dust from the PDM's implosion still not fully settled, the PTI is now faced with growing dissension from within its own ranks which threatens to expose the latent fissures within the party rank and file. At the heart of this brewing crisis is PTI's former secretary general Jahangir Khan Tareen. He and his son are facing allegations of money laundering and price manipulation as one of the major players in the sugar industry. Multiple FIRs have been registered against them and their numerous accounts frozen while FIA, the investigating agency, continues to summon them for questioning. Mr Tareen has denied all these charges and says he is being hounded for political reasons. For a year he kept quiet and stayed on the sidelines but since last week, he has started to speak out. In fact, others from within the party also began to vocalise their support for him. First a few Punjab cabinet ministers and parliamentarians accompanied him to the summons, and then more than two dozen federal and provincial parliamentarians of the PTI attended a dinner at his home to show their support.

This should worry the PTI leadership. So far Mr Tareen's supporters have been careful not to criticise their top leaders and have requested a meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan in an attempt to persuade him that Mr Tareen is being wronged. Mr Tareen himself has chosen his words carefully and refused to be baited into saying anything unfavourable about the prime minister. However, the number of people standing with him, and their argument that he is being persecuted by people within the party, is reflective of the disgruntlement that is brewing ominously inside the PTI. In terms of power politics, this could have dangerous consequences for the PTI government in Punjab. There are speculations that PTI parliamentarians openly supporting Mr Tareen against their

party could constitute a forward bloc inside the Punjab Assembly. With the Usman Buzdar government having a thin majority, a forward bloc could present a clear and present danger for the PTI-PML-Q ruling coalition.

This does not mean that Mr Tareen should not be moved against if he is suspected of wrongdoing. There is merit in Prime Minister Khan's statement that he will hold everyone accountable regardless of whether the person is associated with his party or the opposition. In this endeavour though, the government has to ensure that the process of accountability is indeed across the board. The evidence so far, unfortunately, is to the contrary. While Mr Tareen is accused of manipulating the sugar prices for profit, there are many sugar barons within the PTI ranks who have not been charged with similar offences. If Mr Tareen is successful in convincing more people in the PTI that he is a victim of some conspiracy, he can create serious problems for Mr Khan.

Power to arrest

A SUPREME Court verdict announced on Thursday spelled out what might be considered a self-evident truth in any well-ordered society. According to the five-page judgement authored by Justice Mansoor Ali Shah, a police officer must have due cause to arrest an individual without a warrant and place him under detention. The authority afforded to him by the law to take this action is permissive, not obligatory. At issue was a case concerning the murder of three people who were shot dead in December 2019; five brothers and three unidentified individuals had been nominated in the FIR as the assailants. On March 3, 2020, a sixth brother, who was nominated as an abettor, petitioned the Supreme Court against the cancellation of his pre-arrest bail by the Lahore High Court. The LHC in its ruling had declared such relief to be extraordinary, one that could only be extended to an innocent person implicated in the case on mala fide grounds, but the accused, it said, had failed to prove such ill-intent. The Supreme Court, however, has held that mala fide being a state of mind cannot always be established through direct evidence and must be inferred with the help of the circumstances of the case. The verdict points out that the relevant section of Police Order 2002 lays down this legal position when it stipulates that it is the duty of every police officer to "apprehend all persons whom he is legally authorised to apprehend and for whose apprehension sufficient grounds exist".

What might seem an obvious truth in a more equitable society needs to be underscored in a country where the coercive power of the state is far too often employed not to maintain law and order, but to control and suppress. A police in service of various pressure groups can round up ‘troublesome’ citizens on the strength of mere allegations or fake FIRs. Political opponents can be conveniently silenced and removed from the public eye in the same way. The manner in which the powers of arrest are exercised has a bearing on the fundamental rights to liberty and due process and therefore must be used judiciously. The Supreme Court judgement rightly asserts that pre-arrest bail acts as a check on the police’s power to arrest people. By assessing whether the material before it is incriminating enough to justify arrest, the courts can be a bulwark against injustice.

Unequal vaccine distribution

IT is in times of crisis that we often see the best — or worst — of humanity. In this regard, the pandemic has put the world’s compassion to test. The rate at which rich nations are buying up vaccines from manufacturers that have a finite supply has been described by the WHO chief as “grotesque”. This week, as the body missed its target of seeing vaccines being administered in every country on the 100th day of 2021, Tedros Adhanom once again called out the shocking imbalance in vaccine distribution between rich and poor countries. He also noted that most countries do not have enough vaccines to cover their health workers or vulnerable groups. Of the over 730m vaccines administered all over the world, some 49pc have been injected in rich countries. In contrast, a mere 0.1pc have been administered in the 29 lowest-income countries.

The fact that developing countries are struggling to vaccinate even at-risk segments of the population, while rich nations administer jabs to even young, low-risk citizens is unacceptable. Israel, which has been lauded for its efficient vaccine roll-out and marvellous Covid-19 recovery, has done so at the expense of the Palestinians, who were deprived of vaccinations simply because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wished to send doses to countries that had agreed to move their embassies to Jerusalem. Though inequalities have always existed, the pandemic has underscored how self-serving interests and discriminatory policies have further marginalised vulnerable segments. Without equitable vaccine distribution, those in poor countries will suffer greatly in the long run. In

many of these countries, life expectancy is low and infant mortality high. These factors coupled with low vaccination rates mean these countries will take years to recover. Economically strong countries ought to aid vaccine procurement and disbursement. Though many leaders in countries with high vaccination rates are congratulating themselves for 'a job well done', they ought to realise they are creating a false sense of security. Covid-19 mutations will continue to be a threat, until the majority of the world is vaccinated.

Pakistan-India peace

AS the Pakistan-India peace process — or at least the shaky beginnings of the latest round — moves forward, several questions swirl over the direction it will take. Of course, in a relationship as complex as this, and with disputes going back over seven decades, peacemaking will not be easy, and there will be pitfalls aplenty before any workable agreement is reached.

Even over the last few weeks there have been many ups and downs, with the first positive sign in a long time coming in late February, when both sides agreed to silence their guns along the LoC. This was followed by an exchange of pleasantries and public pronouncements calling for peace in the region from the highest offices in both capitals, along with a decision by Pakistan to import Indian sugar and cotton. However, shortly afterwards, the trade plan was nixed.

Now, two fresh developments have posed further questions. Firstly, the Foreign Office has said the Saarc summit, due to be held in Pakistan in October, can take place if “artificial obstacles” are removed, in a thinly veiled reference to India. In the second, more ominous development, the US National Intelligence Council has said Pakistan and India may “stumble” into a large-scale war within the next five years.

Regarding the American assertion, while it has an alarmist ring to it, it is not without substance. After all, just over two years ago both states came close to conflict following India's Balakot misadventure, while some of New Delhi's top generals have been issuing combative statements against Pakistan. Be that as it may, for the time being it seems that temperatures are coming down, and the jury remains out on what and who has triggered the latest desire for peace. The fact is that the latest thaw offers both Islamabad and New Delhi a chance to show the world that they are interested in long-term peace. And more than creating a soft

image for the international audience, both sides owe it to their people to forge a peaceful path based on coexistence and friendship.

However, beyond rhetoric, there are some very serious issues standing in the way of peace, namely Kashmir, as the FO has highlighted. For there to be long-lasting peace, the Kashmir question will have to be addressed in a manner acceptable to the people of the region. Experts note that everything — including Kashmir — can be resolved if there is a will in both capitals. Indeed some, such as Manmohan Singh's special envoy Satinder Lambah, who was previously involved in backchannel talks and was quoted in the papers the other day, have endorsed this form of secret diplomacy. Perhaps the best option is to continue with such parleys in the hopes of achieving a breakthrough that can be publicised at the right time, while reiterating our stance that repression must end in held Kashmir.

Child abuse

IN its annual report, the NGO Sahil found that there has been a 4pc increase in documented cases of major crimes against children (2,960 cases of child sexual abuse, kidnapping, missing children and child marriages) in 2020 from the previous year. To put this figure into perspective, this means that at least eight children were abused each day last year. Whether this rise can be attributed to increased reporting thanks to awareness and advocacy efforts to reduce stigmas for survivors, or due to an actual rise in such cases (perhaps, in part, exacerbated by the pandemic), one thing is certain. All evidence suggests that reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg. How, then, can we address an issue that is so deeply prevalent? Are populist calls for swift, brutal punishments for rapists, which are currently in vogue and also being propagated by the government as a policy response, actually helping to make this country safer for women and children? So far, there seems to be little evidence of it.

The truth is, that for all the alarms raised by child rights and health experts as well as by survivors, both state and society continue to bury their heads in the sand rather than confront the bitter realities of sexual violence. Both qualitative and quantitative data confirm the fact that, in the overwhelming majority of sexual violence cases, the perpetrators are known to their victims. For children, they are neighbours, family friends, teachers, even immediate relatives, who are able to

exert their influence to silence victims and those they might turn to for help. What incentive do victims have to seek justice when the potential fallout of reporting their own family members includes the loss of what little support structure they might have? Harsher punishments for abusers to assuage society's desire for retribution, or expanded social safety nets to reduce harm and support the actual victims? On Friday, the government issued a second statement regarding the prime minister's harmful remarks on sexual violence, in which it spoke of the importance of addressing the "root causes" and taking a "holistic approach". We can start by looking at all the exhaustive research indicating that widespread societal tolerance for violence, and gender and economic inequalities — ie, acceptance of power imbalances — are key risk factors in child abuse. We ought to start by listening to and learning from survivors and experts instead of dismissing their testimony.

New tax chief's task

THE FBR got a new chairman on Friday. Asim Ahmed, a senior IRS officer who was serving as the Board's IT member before getting the new job, is the fifth chairman brought in by the ruling PTI since it came to power two and half years back. The frequent changes in the top leadership of the country's premier tax agency are but a reflection of the government's frustration with the FBR's abysmal performance in the last three years. It also speaks volumes for the prevalent ad hoc policy regarding FBR, which generally defines the quality of governance or lack of it under the present dispensation. The new chairman has come at a time when the country's tax collection has drastically declined over the last three years, and its poor performance is weakening the government's fiscal position and adding to public debt stock.

In these circumstances, the new FBR chairman will face the gargantuan task of achieving the next fiscal's tax target — which is 27pc greater than the expected collection this year — that the government has agreed with the IMF for the resumption of the suspended \$6bn loan programme. His job is even tougher with the coronavirus resurging rapidly across the country, threatening to derail the nascent, fragile recovery and to further contract the narrow tax base. The more difficult task will be to implement reforms aimed at restructuring the nation's inefficient and corrupt tax system to increase the number of taxpayers by bringing untaxed and under-taxed persons into the net through extensive

automation. The extensive data already available with the FBR and other government agencies can also help identify tax cheaters. Another important task will be to cut the number of indirect taxes, reform the punishing withholding regime, and boost collection of direct taxes. Breaking status quo in a government department is never easy. If the government wants to plug the large tax gap and mobilise tax revenues, it will have to stand firmly behind the new chairman and ensure security of his tenure in his new office.

Reform after Daska

OVER the last two months, Daska has come to denote more than a constituency election. A routine bypoll in February became the focus of national attention when it was marred by violence and then the mysterious disappearance of an entire group of presiding officers late in the foggy night. The sordid saga of Daska, that saw the ECP take unprecedented action against the Punjab administration, and witnessed the Supreme Court upholding the ECP decision for a re-poll in the entire constituency, finally concluded over the weekend with the PML-N candidate beating her PTI rival with a comprehensive margin.

With the eyes of the nation on the NA-75 Daska constituency, and the ECP and local administration leaving nothing to chance, the election happened smoothly and without any untoward incident. The losing candidate made some undignified remarks against the ECP in the aftermath of the result but by and large the PTI government accepted its defeat.

The original Daska election in February symbolised everything that is wrong with our electoral system. It witnessed the government of the day using state resources to influence the outcome, the local administration using strong-arm tactics to browbeat voters as well as the election staff, the ruling party refusing to admit any wrongdoing in the face of evidence of electoral and administrative skullduggery, and the government stooping to criticise the ECP instead of admitting its own failures. That election showed why we are unable, or perhaps unwilling, to reform the electoral process knowing full well that it requires urgent fixing.

However, the latest re-poll in Daska has shown that we can, in fact, get an election right if all stakeholders are agreed upon it. The PTI government has finally come around to demanding electoral reforms that require a consensus

between all major parties. This is an urgent requirement in order to ensure that the next general elections are held in a free and transparent manner. Electoral malpractice generates instability and delegitimises the mandate of the winner, thereby triggering one crisis after another. This root cause must be addressed with all sincerity if we want stability in the system.

It is therefore important that the opposition take the government's offer seriously, sit across the table in the relevant parliamentary committees, and begin the process of discussing and debating these reforms. With a little more than two years left before the next general elections, there is no time to lose. Empowering the ECP should be a foundational element of this reform package. We have seen in the Daska election what a difference the ECP can make when it is ready and willing to exercise its powers. Meanwhile, the PML-N has shown that it retains its popularity in central Punjab despite facing the rigours of being in the opposition. The PTI has work to do in Punjab.

Reinstating LGs

THE PTI government in Punjab is sending confused and conflicting signals to people when it comes to the critical issue of devolving power to the grassroots as promised by the ruling party in its election campaign. On the one hand, the prime minister is said to have finally approved a plan for developing south Punjab as a separate 'administrative zone' in the province with an all-powerful secretariat to tackle issues ranging from lack of resources to under-representation of the region in public-sector jobs. On the other hand, it is stalling the restoration of elected local governments in the province despite the Supreme Court order declaring their dissolution two years ago to be unconstitutional. The decision to establish an independent secretariat in south Punjab has come after the Buzdar government drew strong criticism from within and outside the PTI against its alleged attempt in March to roll back the few functions and powers it had reluctantly transferred to the newly created regional administrative set-up. However, the government does not appear to be under much pressure to reinstate the dissolved local governments, the apex court decision and repeated pledges to take the financial and administrative powers to the local level notwithstanding.

Local governments or the lowest tier of government are considered crucial for a functional democratic set-up. No country can tackle the complex governance and public-service delivery issues in the absence of a strong, functional local democracy. Pakistan is no exception. If we desire to improve the quality of financial and administrative governance in the country, we will first have to strengthen grassroots democracy by empowering people through their locally elected representatives. Indeed, the establishment of an independent administrative set-up in south Punjab will go a long way in the resolution of issues facing residents of the region and ultimately in the creation of a new province. But neither a secretariat nor a new province can ever replace the LG system if the intent is to address structural problems in public service delivery. The sad part of the story is that our politicians and bureaucracy do not want to share authority with local representatives. Hence, we have seen governments frequently rolling back even powerless local governments. If the present PTI administration is genuinely interested in improving governance through transfer of powers to the people, it should strengthen the constitutional cover given to local governments.

Remembering I.A. Rehman

THE quest for a progressive society in Pakistan, at peace with itself and its neighbours, suffered a big setback in the passing away of Ibn Abdur Rehman on Monday. Rehman Sahib, as he was known across much of South Asia, was a celebrated and dogged pursuer of peace in the subcontinent. He founded the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy. Implicit in the nomenclature was the suggestion dear to Rehman Sahib: one could not go without the other. “A legend, a crusader for justice, peace and democracy, a lover of literature, poetry and music”, is how the PIFPD remembered him in a statement. At home, he will be equally warmly remembered as a defender of myriad human rights, most urgent among his priorities being the fight for equality and justice for Pakistan’s women and minorities.

Rehman Sahib was the recipient of several major awards, including the Magsaysay, for his pioneering work in human rights, which in his view began facing a stepped-up assault in Pakistan in the Zia era. The legacy of that military rule with its mediaeval trappings has proved difficult to dislodge. He believed the making of an illiberal society in Pakistan accelerated sharply during that

particularly dark chapter of history. Rehman Sahib was forthright in advocating democracy and human rights in neighbouring countries where he was celebrated as a friend and a hero of valiant causes. A formidable journalist with experience that was honed in the era of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mazhar Ali Khan, he will be greatly remembered for his sharp observations, including in his weekly column for this paper, on practically every issue that touched the lives of ordinary people. He used the option of clear prose for most issues, but displayed a knack for occasional sardonic humour too. India and Pakistan were nearly similar in a parity of 19-21 he would say, departing from an Urdu metaphor that stresses a tinier difference as 19-20. "If we say that you might take offence," he would laugh with his Indian friends.

TLP protests

APPEASEMENT of reactionary forces amounts to playing with fire — and, ultimately, to setting one's own house alight. That reality is once again starkly evident, with dozens of sites in urban areas held hostage by violent mobs suffused with self-righteous rage and, even more dangerously, confident of their power to bring the country to a halt.

Since Monday, TLP activists have been demonstrating against the arrest of their leader, Allama Saad Hussain Rizvi. He was detained after announcing countrywide agitation from April 20 to demand the French ambassador's expulsion and a ban on imports from France in protest against the publication of blasphemous images in that country. The right to protest is contingent upon doing so peacefully. In the ongoing disturbances however, many people have been injured and several killed.

Sadly, the state has carried out multiple experiments in nurturing or at least tolerating ultra-right elements to achieve dubious short-term gains. The TLP is merely the latest in a long line of such ill-conceived initiatives. Balochistan descended into an orgy of bloodletting after extremist outfits were given virtual carte blanche to carry out their sectarian agenda in return for countering the separatist, and largely secular, insurgency in the province. Even the Pakistani Taliban were handled with kid gloves in the earlier years; 'peace deal' after 'peace deal' was negotiated. Each one was violated by the militants, but it succeeded in further strengthening their position against the state.

During the Faizabad sit-in in November 2017, the TLP was similarly indulged, perhaps on account of its potential to destabilise the PML-N government and cut into the party's vote bank. The dharna, based on an entirely specious pretext, saw traffic between Rawalpindi and Islamabad brought to a halt for 20 days, causing huge inconvenience to citizens. The impasse was resolved only after a humiliating climbdown by the government when an army-brokered deal was negotiated with the protesters, who were given envelopes full of cash for 'travel expenses'. PTI chief Imran Khan, in the opposition at the time, took an equivocal stance instead of condemning the TLP.

If he had paid heed to history, he would have realised that if his ambition to come to power was realised, the ultra-right group would become a thorn in his side as well. But that would have required a far-sighted clarity of thought. Sure enough, when Asiya Bibi was acquitted of blasphemy in 2018, the group led violent protests all over the country. The current unrest is a result of the PTI government having promised TLP last November that they would take up the matter of the French ambassador's expulsion with parliament. Pandering to demands by reactionary forces only emboldens them further, making the challenge to deal with them ever greater. For the good of the country, and its image as a nation where extremism has no place, such groups must be strictly reined in.

PPP's formal exit

THE PPP's formal resignation from all offices of the PDM comes as no surprise after weeks of tension and public acrimony between the various parties of the opposition alliance. PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari minced no words in criticising the PML-N leadership for issuing a show cause notice from the platform of the party. In response, PDM head Maulana Fazlur Rehman summoned a meeting of the alliance on Tuesday and afterwards told the media that the alliance would forge ahead regardless of PPP office bearers' resignations. The alliance's secretary general Shahid Khaqan Abbasi had earlier said that he did not foresee the PPP remaining in the PDM. The alliance is clearly in the process of becoming dysfunctional.

When all the opposition parties had gathered in Islamabad in September last year to form the PDM, they had drawn up a lengthy charter of objectives. However, the only real agenda that united them in this alliance was to see the

back of the PTI government. It was a glue that held them together but within a few weeks it had started to become clear that there were deep divisions between the PPP and PML-N when it came to operationalising this objective. The public rallies and congregations created a certain momentum for what was billed as the final blow to the government through a long march to Islamabad and combined resignations from all the assemblies. The internal contradictions within the parties in the alliance bubbled to the surface before the movement to oust the government could reach a climax. There are competing explanations about who cast the first stone but once the unravelling started, there was not much that anyone could do to stop it. The leadership of the two main parties could have, if it wanted to, confined their disagreements to internal meetings but it is fair to assume now that a deliberate choice was made to go public. Party interests, it appeared, had overwhelmed those of the alliance. The PDM may remain on the political landscape as a hollowed-out structure, but as a political entity it bears little relevance to the situation on the ground. The PPP has made its choice to go it alone and the PML-N will now have no choice but to do the same. With general elections a little more than two years away, both parties have enough time to chart their own directions.

Natanz attack

AS the P5+1 and Iran try to breathe life back into the JCPOA, as the nuclear deal is officially known, it appears that Israel is resorting to subterfuge and sabotage to try and derail any solution and keep the Middle East on a knife-edge. On Sunday, the Iranian nuclear facility of Natanz was targeted by a “small explosion” which Tehran has squarely blamed on Tel Aviv, while sections of the Israeli and American press have also pointed to the Jewish state’s role. Israel has long been trying to neutralise Iran’s nuclear capabilities. In the past, it was believed to have targeted the Islamic Republic’s nuclear programme with Stuxnet malware, while a number of assassinations of Iranian nuclear officials — most recently that of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh last year — were also believed to be the handiwork of Tel Aviv. However, such reckless behaviour has its limits, and there is a high possibility that this covert and proxy war may transform into a ‘hot’ war. Already there have been numerous attacks on both Iranian and Israeli vessels in Middle Eastern waters, with each side blaming the other for the incidents.

If the international community, especially Israel's Western backers, want to truly revive the nuclear deal and prevent a fresh conflagration in the Middle East, they must communicate to their friends in Tel Aviv that the current path of sabotage must be abandoned. Indulging in a cloak-and-dagger game, which Israel has been adept at since its inception, is relatively easy; containing a conflict in a volatile region with multiple battlefronts will be a very difficult task. Therefore, diplomacy must be given a chance to succeed and the parties to the JCPOA must continue their negotiations undisturbed by hostile actors seeking confrontation. And while Tehran should demonstrate restraint, Tel Aviv will bear the brunt of the responsibility should a wider conflict break out. Moreover, this time the front line will likely be drawn from the waters of the Gulf to the shores of the Levant.

With no place to go

No matter where one looks, one can't escape the heartrending sight of scores of children of all ages begging, doing manual labour, or selling small everyday items at main intersections or in bazaars in Pakistani cities. Many among them are runaway or abandoned children. Indeed, so large are their numbers that one tends to forget that the Constitution gives them all the basic rights: the right to health, to education, to protection and to dignity. This reminder recently came from Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, who was addressing an event held to mark the International Day for Street Children observed on April 12 every year. Unfortunately, despite the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution, successive governments have failed to look after our young ones. Children from poor backgrounds already confront huge challenges, none of which are of their own or their family's making. However, children living on the streets are even more disadvantaged as they endure routine physical and sexual abuse, lack of shelter, a cruel work environment and frequent run-ins with unsympathetic law enforcers. And they have no one to turn to. Though child protection departments or bureaus exist in all four provinces, their offices frequently remain closed. The relevant laws for child protection are there but their enforcement is negligible.

The Sindh government claims to have built two shelters in Karachi, housing a total of 400 street children, while similar shelters are said to be functioning in Hyderabad and Sukkur. Meanwhile, the federal government has launched another flagship project called Zamang Kor under which a large apartment

complex outside Peshawar is being turned into a housing society for around 1,000 abandoned children. These silo initiatives might provide some short-term respite and positive PR but are ineffective in the long run. There are other societal factors the government needs to address to minimise the number of forsaken children on the streets: population control, uncontrolled urbanisation, poverty and access to jobs, adequate housing and shelter and beggar mafias. Without a long-term effort, children's miseries will only increase.

Afghanistan exit

THE Biden administration has now given a more definite timeline where the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan is concerned. While the US president had said that it would be "tough" to meet the May 1 deadline agreed upon between the previous US administration and the Afghan Taliban, American officials now say that the withdrawal will be completed by Sept 11. While some may see this as shifting the goalposts, it can also be viewed as a more realistic, achievable date.

Moreover, it is significant that the announcement has come ahead of Afghan peace talks scheduled to be held in Istanbul from April 24. However, the Afghan Taliban have said they will not participate in the event in Turkey "until all foreign forces withdraw from our homeland". But it is also true that much can change between now and April 24 and we can expect hectic diplomatic activity to make the Istanbul event a success, and bring the Taliban round to accepting the new date.

As has been stressed before in these columns, foreign involvement in Afghanistan has been a major source of that country's instability, though the Afghan political class and warlords have also played a significant role in the destruction of their homeland. However, the 'forever war' cannot continue, and the sooner foreign forces leave Afghanistan and Afghans themselves take responsibility for their country, the better. Washington must stick to the new date and ensure the process is not delayed further. And while the Taliban are talking tough about the latest development, they must show flexibility and continue to negotiate with the government in Kabul.

The fact is that the Istanbul meeting presents a good opportunity for all Afghan factions — the Western-backed government, the Taliban, other political and tribal

stakeholders — to try and push the peace process forward and set some doable goals. And it would be a good idea for all factions, particularly the Taliban, to desist from all acts of violence as a major confidence-building measure to show that they come to the Turkish city in good faith. If the Taliban continue to display a rigid stance and decide to boycott the meeting, it may affect the withdrawal of foreign forces, and plunge Afghanistan into more uncertainty.

The fact is that Afghanistan has suffered for decades as powerful local players have refused to compromise and have insisted on hogging power. That has resulted in relentless misery for the people of that country. The US and its Western allies appear to have had enough of the Afghan war — though some Republican figures seem to want the US mission to continue indefinitely — and the onus is now on the Afghans to take control of their destiny and rebuild their country. The weeks ahead will show whether or not the principal Afghan players are willing to take up the gauntlet.

New census

EARLIER this week, the Council of Common Interests approved the controversial National Population and Housing Census, 2017, with a majority vote after over three years. Sindh stuck to its stance, voting against the census results. The MQM, the ruling party's coalition partner from urban Sindh, had already rejected the results during a cabinet meeting when the government decided to put the matter before the CCI. In view of the large-scale reservations on the census results, the CCI also decided to organise a new census for fresh delimitations of national and provincial constituencies before the next elections in 2023. The Sindh government and MQM are not alone in their concerns. Opposition parties in KP had expressed their doubts about the data collected from erstwhile Fata. Similarly, some have misgivings about the authenticity and quality of the census data related to religious minorities and transgender persons. The census directly affects the number and size of the national, provincial and local constituencies a province or a district gets, as well as the allocation of financial resources to the provinces under the NFC award. For some, its significance lies in its relationship with the allotment of quota to different regions or segments of the population in federal and provincial jobs. Little wonder then that the entire exercise has become politicised over time as provincial, ethnic, religious, economic and other fissures deepen in society. Hence, the last census took place 19 years after the

previous one, which was organised after a lapse of 17 years in 1998 in violation of the Constitution that mandates it be held every 10 years.

The government says it plans to take all stakeholders on board before starting the next census process later this year to avoid controversies. But will that help? We know that the status quo favours some and is harmful to others. It will be naïve to expect a wider political consensus over census results without technology. The present method of collecting population and housing data is unreliable, inefficient, expensive, time-consuming and prone to errors. Many countries now use smartphones and tablets for conducting a census because it helps efficient and reliable collection and processing of disintegrated data. Error-free population data is also important for better future economic planning, tax resource mobilisation and efficient allocation of financial resources for socioeconomic development. It is, therefore, advisable for the government to deploy technology for the new census to ensure transparent and dependable population and housing data collection.

Ramazan profiteering

WITH the month of Ramazan underway, people have begun to feel the effects of galloping inflation even more. Prices for essentials were already on the ascent before the month set in. However, with the beginning of the fasting month, partially due to rising demand and mostly due to the insatiable greed of traders, prices for food items are hitting the roof. It has been a rough year with Covid-19 — amongst other factors — shaking the national economy. In such bleak times, the working and indeed even the middle classes are being deprived of the simple pleasure of sharing iftar delights such as fruit and other delicacies with family due to high costs. As is mostly the case, official price lists do not reflect the realities of the market, with a wide margin between government prices and the cost of goods in the bazaar. Every year, in the run-up to Ramazan, officials make the same tired announcements and promise that profiteering will not be tolerated, but these efforts are merely for public consumption. The trader rules the market, and charges the consumer at will.

There have been some steps to check the price hike during Ramazan, such as offering staples at subsidised prices at Utility Stores. However, this solution is limited in scope as not everyone has access to Utility Stores, and crowding at

such establishments during the pandemic — as a picture published in this paper has shown — throws up fresh challenges. There is a need to ensure that the price-checking mechanism at the local level is working properly, and that profiteers are fined for fleecing the public. Moreover, a more realistic pricing mechanism needs to be put in place as traders — not entirely without justification — say the government sets prices unilaterally, without their input. A middle ground needs to be found that allows consumers to buy basic kitchen essentials at affordable prices, and traders to make a profit within respectable margins without breaking the poor man's back

Slow recovery

THE pace of growth in large-scale manufacturing output continues to slow down, with LSM production contracting by 4.15pc in February on a month-on-month basis. Overall, the new estimates from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics show that big industry has expanded by 7.45pc year-on-year during the eight-month period from July to February on the recovering demand for cars, cement and other building material, tobacco, pharmaceutical products etc, as well as measures implemented by the SBP to support businesses affected by Covid-19 through generous liquidity injections. The rebound in big industry, which constitutes about 80pc of manufacturing and 10.7pc of GDP, is a big improvement over the more than 10pc contraction in the last fiscal and has led many to believe the economy has turned the corner. The SBP last month revised its GDP growth projection for the current year to 3pc against the IMF's forecast of 1.5pc and the World Bank's 1.3pc. Indeed, the economy has shown signs of early recovery since summer after shrinking by 0.4pc last year on account of harsh IMF-mandated policies and lockdowns. But the reversal in the LSM output growth trend, which appears to be taking hold and may last through the remaining four months of the fiscal year, should help the government and SBP readjust their expectations.

Besides slowing industrial production, there have been other negative developments underlining the fragility of the recent recovery. For example, the agricultural sector is likely to shrink owing to a big drop in the cotton output. Similarly, the third wave of infections is expected to impact manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, and transport like last year. The recent restrictions on mobility have significantly affected the services sector. Financial constraints have

already slowed down public development spending. Although the country's external sector remains stable and foreign currency stocks are rising on new loans, the recent rise in the trade deficit is worrisome as imports increase and exports drop. So far, the increasing remittances have helped offset the impact of the widening trade deficit on the external sector, but for how long? Further widening of the trade gap and reduction in home remittances could put pressure on the external sector going forward. On the whole, economic indicators are much better today than a year ago. Yet, recovery remains feeble and in need of policy support. But the resumption of the IMF programme could curb the government's efforts to help the economy unless there's another plan.

Ban is no answer

THE government has officially banned the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan and issued a notification accordingly. This extreme step comes in response to nearly three days of rioting by the TLP after its leader Saad Rizvi was arrested. The government was unable to stop TLP workers from blocking roads and highways across the country and destroying public and private property.

The enraged workers also attacked policemen, leading to the loss of precious lives. The writ of the state was seriously damaged as TLP cadres ran amok without facing any effective resistance from the law enforcers. When the government finally took action, it chose to do so by banning the party. This has been the state's modus operandi in the past too when extremist groups it nurtured went out of control.

The difference is that the ultra-right TLP, for all its vitriol and predilection for violence, is a political party registered with the ECP. It contested the 2018 elections across the country and has representation in the Sindh Assembly. Can it then be technically classified as a terrorist organisation — although its workers have routinely unleashed violence that simply should not to be tolerated at any cost? A far better option would have been for the government to use its administrative and legal powers to hold the rioters accountable and make them face the law.

ECP-registered parties hold demonstrations that often result in the disturbance of law and order. The PTI itself has been down this path. During the 2014 dharna, its workers, along with those of Tahirul Qadri, had attacked the PTV centre and

manhandled law-enforcement personnel. But few would argue that the PTI should have been banned. The law should not spare a single violent worker of the TLP but banning it is no answer to the challenge it presents to the state. The government must do some introspection: why did it feel compelled to sign an agreement with the violent outfit a few months ago? This was a wrong step and it is important that it acknowledges its mistake and holds all those officials responsible who made that agreement possible and signed it.

It is an open secret that the TLP was nourished by the state for its vested interests. If today it has spiralled out of control, the blame lies with those who helped it grow into the threat it is today. But a blanket ban on the party is a futile attempt to solve a complex problem, and is an acknowledgement that the government does not want to take the difficult decisions needed to address the challenge thrown up by the TLP. The ban will not dilute the narrative that fuels the party, it may even fan it. The government would be advised to take a more nuanced approach and desist from actions that are unlikely to produce the intended results.

Professor's removal

IN a step that will go far in sending a message of reassurance to female students and academic staff in universities, the KP ombudsperson for protection against the harassment of women recommended the removal of a senior professor at Islamia College University in Peshawar for inappropriate behaviour towards a women student. The student had approached the ombudsperson last November with a complaint against the chairman of the political science department. After an inquiry conducted into the matter, the ombudsperson's office recommended that the professor be removed from his post under Section 4(II)(c) of Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010. The order also recommended additional penalties under Section 10-2(h) to be decided on by the relevant authority. Considering how pervasive harassment is on campuses and how university authorities tend to ignore or dismiss such allegations — as was seen in this case initially — the decision comes as a breath of fresh air. Indeed, Islamia College University was the scene of protests last year in a demonstration that saw female students from other institutions in Peshawar participate as well. The students were protesting against harassment by male students and academic staff members.

One hopes that this decision will serve as an example for other provinces, where harassment in campuses is just as rampant in both public and private universities. A most egregious case of harassment and blackmail of women students was the one in the University of Balochistan. The students' trauma came to light a couple of years ago. Despite the fact that the case rattled the provincial and federal administration and the Balochistan High Court took suo motu notice of the matter, no legal action appears to have been taken against the alleged perpetrators who included university officials. Similarly, several cases have been reported from Karachi University but the university management has been reluctant to pursue them. Unfortunately, when the highest in the land promote the strange logic that harassment is a consequence of 'obscenity', lesser mortals will feel that they have a free hand.

Pak-India mediation

QUESTIONS had been swirling about what and who has prompted the latest detente between Pakistan and India. Now, it appears that these queries have been answered to some extent,

with the UAE's ambassador to Washington saying that his country was mediating between the rival South Asian states. Yousef Al Otaiba, while participating in a virtual discussion confirmed that the UAE is helping bring Pakistan and India together. While he didn't expect Islamabad and New Delhi to "become best friends", Mr Otaiba did want to see the relationship as "healthy and functional". The ambassador's comments coincide with reports that Pakistani and Indian intelligence officials met in Dubai, amongst other locations, which has apparently played a role in restoring calm along the Line of Control.

While India has always been averse to third parties getting involved in mediation, perhaps the latest round of bilateral contacts have been accepted by New Delhi as there have been backchannel negotiations, occurring away from the public view. Moreover, the UAE appears to be an interlocutor that is acceptable to both parties, as opposed to the US or other Western states playing the role of peacemaker. Regardless of who is pushing the peace process forward, the fact that Pakistan and India are talking after a very long period of vitriolic exchanges must be appreciated. While this country has kept the door for dialogue open, the sentiment has not always been reciprocated by the other side. However,

attitudes in India may be changing, and even a 'functional' relationship is better than a constant state of confrontation.

Yet despite the positive vibes, people in both countries — especially the respective media outlets — must not hope for an immediate solution. This bilateral relationship is one of the most difficult in the world. The states have fought a number of wars and a high level of mistrust exists between the establishments of the two sides. So while hope does spring eternal, ground realities must not be forgotten. In the present circumstances, the best way forward is to quietly continue backchannel talks, away from angry, noisy lobbies that are unwilling to accept a peaceful subcontinent. Once there is progress, a blueprint for more formal talks can be laid out. The fact is that when it comes to Pakistan-India relations even preliminary negotiations and CBMs on 'soft' issues are an achievement. This is the first step in a long journey of normalisation, and it should be remembered that several such steps have been taken in the past, only for the process to fizzle out amongst noise and confusion. The other alternative — of conflict — prophesied by some, including the US, is quite unsavoury and the leaderships of both countries owe it to their people to give their all to the peace process, and put decades of wars, hatred and confrontation behind them.

Energy exploration

SOME exploration and production companies want the government to prioritise offshore exploration — a high-risk business owing to the low probability of discovery and formidable costs — in the next bidding round to be convened towards the end of the year. The last offshore drilling attempt at Kekra-1, well off the Karachi coast, had cost the four joint venture partners, including the state-owned OGDC, a whopping \$125m. That the E&P players are willing to delve into this area despite the fact that offshore drilling in Pakistan has never yielded a commercial discovery underlines their confidence in the potential of such ventures. A successful offshore gamble could produce much better results than an onshore venture and help local companies rope in foreign investors as their JV partners even if the prospects of discovery are as low as 8pc as in the case of the Kekra well. Besides, the data gathered so far shows better offshore exploration prospects than onshore ventures.

Pakistan's reliance on imported energy is increasing with the passage of time. Currently, the country meets more than 70pc of its energy requirements through imports, which form almost a quarter of the total import bill and obstructs economic growth. Although gas has been the most crucial domestic energy source, no major discovery has been made for the past decade or more with domestic production declining to 3.6bcfd. Likewise, oil production has plummeted to 75,000bpd from a peak of 95,000bpd in 2015. Recent discoveries were small. There is no chance of reversing the declining trend in the short term since there is no major project in the pipeline which could contribute to local gas production. In the last 15 years, there has been only one major gas discovery bigger than 1TCF and only two oil discoveries greater than 50mmbbl. Most foreign companies have left Pakistan, and new exploration is on the decline because of poor prospects of big discoveries, security issues in Balochistan, delays in decision-making and frequent changes in commitments to E&P companies. Pakistan has a vast, challenging sedimentary area yet to be explored. The E&P companies need to be encouraged by ensuring a helpful business environment and security, as well as through tax, price and policy incentives for enabling them to undertake high-risk onshore and offshore exploration activities and to exploit unconventional hydrocarbon resources. An increase in E&P activity will reduce our dependence on imported fuels and expand downstream economic activity besides creating jobs.

Blocking social media

FOR four hours this week, all social media platforms in the country were shut down, a measure the government said was necessary ahead of the clampdown on violent TLP supporters on Friday. Successive governments have blocked mobile networks and platforms such as TikTok, Facebook and YouTube on separate occasions in the past, but this blanket freezing of all internet-based communication applications is unprecedented.

Without prior notice, the government prevented millions from using these platforms to “maintain public order and safety” — a step that bodes badly for future internet freedoms as the threat of more unannounced, arbitrary bans looms. The negative effects of such a ban have not been lost on the government.

After the clampdown, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid apologised to Pakistani citizens for the inconvenience the government's step had caused them, and said that the measure had become "essential" as violent protests were feared. However, his apology does not change the fact that the move was a naked display of the state's ability to block social media and the internet at will. If anything, it has shown that in the future, a protest campaign or demonstration by one of the mainstream groups, can also trigger such a draconian step in the name of public safety. For large-scale public protests, where violence is always a possibility, such a ban has set a dark and dangerous precedent.

The state should employ more effective strategies to deal with such situations and handle the latter through strong law-enforcement mechanisms. Depriving citizens of their fundamental right to communication is contrary to democratic norms, and should only be considered when there is a serious threat of a terror attack. By framing its action as a necessary evil for public order, the state has unwittingly admitted its failures.

The interior minister's promise that this would not happen again is simply not enough, especially given how rapidly freedoms are being eroded in the country. Attempts by the government to criminalise criticism, block access to platforms and grant the authorities sweeping powers of surveillance are a normalised reality. Digital rights activists have repeatedly criticised the social media rules framed under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, through which the government can block and remove content it deems unlawful. With all these signs of the government's desire to control the conversation on these platforms, this past week's blanket ban is yet another reminder of the government flexing its censorship muscle.

More cabinet changes

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has reshuffled his cabinet yet again in what is obviously another attempt to shore up his government's performance. It is of course the prime minister's prerogative to bring in new people in the cabinet, and rotate the existing ones if he feels they are not performing, but changes with such frequency in key ministries should also be a cause for concern. Finance is arguably the most important ministry in the federal government and fixing the economy that the PTI claims was 'broken' when it inherited it in 2018, means that

the new government should have had the clarity to pursue a consistent line of policy. Four finance ministers in less than three years gives the impression that the PTI government continues to experiment with a solution.

What compounds this confusion is the fact that the government has not bothered to explain why the previous finance ministers were removed. Asad Umar was the 'economy czar' of the PTI during the opposition years and it was his economic worldview and policy prescription that constituted the PTI's agenda. Why was he then removed as finance minister within a relatively short period? An explanation by the PTI leadership would have at least made it clear what his mistake was and how the party intended to correct that mistake. Without any such elaboration, he was put to pasture and Hafeez Shaikh, a technocrat with no links to the PTI, and no contribution to the party's policy planning, was inducted. When Mr Sheikh was fired, again there was no explanation given other than a feeble one that he had failed to control inflation. If any explanation has come about where the PTI's economic performance has gone awry, it has in fact come from Shaukat Tarin, the new finance minister. In an interview earlier this month, he had stated that PTI had pursued a flawed policy since it came to power. In other words, Mr Tarin indicted his two predecessors.

Similarly, repeated ministerial changes in important ministries like power, information and economic affairs suggest that the PTI leadership is still unsure of what it really wants to achieve in terms of specific deliverables. Fawad Chaudhry, for instance, was delivering a decent performance as the information minister in the early days of the PTI government. No explanation was given as to why he was removed in haste. Neither has the government cared to explain why he has been brought back as the information minister once again. Such impetuous decision-making makes for bad optics and accentuates the perception that the PTI leadership remains unsure of itself even at this late stage in its five-year term. This also sends ambiguous signals to the bureaucracy that is supposed to implement the larger agenda of the government. The PTI government needs to settle down to a consistent way of governing. It is about time.

Peasant rights in Sindh

IN a seminar held in Nawabshah recently, the Sindh Human Rights Commission and Hari Welfare Association reiterated a common and long-held complaint

about the state of human rights and quality of life in the province: for all its progressive legislation, Sindh suffers due to a lack of implementation of these laws. This yawning chasm in governance is experienced most keenly in rural areas, where basic labour rights — such as a minimum wage, safe working conditions and guaranteed paid leave — for workers and peasants remain elusive. Despite the passage of the Sindh Women Agriculture Workers Act in December 2019 (which was hailed at the time as a milestone for rural women workers) there is no evidence to suggest that any measures have been taken to implement it. Nor has there been any substantive change to on-ground conditions since the Sindh High Court's landmark judgement, also in 2019, upholding the prohibition of unpaid work in the Sindh Tenancy Act by striking down an amendment to omit it, and ruling that cases would fall under the jurisdiction of the judiciary rather than the executive. Similarly, the Sindh Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 2015, is little more than a paper tiger as this form of modern-day slavery is still considerably prevalent in the region.

Through a combination of indifference and collusion, the provincial government and other arms of the state apparatus have abetted the landed elite's stiff resistance to formalisation and documentation of the rural workforce. Breaking this cycle of human suffering requires moving beyond progressive rhetoric and honouring our commitments to protect millions of vulnerable citizens. Only a genuine engagement with these stakeholder groups, including formal mechanisms to ensure implementation, reporting and reviews to identify gaps and shortcomings can begin to redress decades of cruelty. The Sindh government must engage positively with human rights bodies and peasants groups, and send a clear signal that no one, no matter how powerful or influential, can deprive any individual of their rights.

Cricket triumph

TEAM Pakistan have a number of reasons to rejoice after their 3-1 T20 series win over hosts South Africa on Friday. First, the victory was a rare away tour success, and secondly, it came on the heels of their emphatic ODI series win. What complemented their success was Babar Azam's remarkable debut as skipper, which had been delayed owing to his thumb injury in New Zealand. The prolific right-hander led from the front with his brilliant batting throughout the South Africa tour. It was a performance that catapulted him to number one spot

in the ICC ODI rankings — an honour that had eluded Pakistan for 17 long years. Up until last December, Pakistan's limited-over performances oscillated from ordinary to forgettable as they tasted successive defeats against England and New Zealand. The batting looked in disarray, the bowling appeared toothless and the fielding failed to measure up. The critics were unsparing and rightly so. They expressed serious doubts about Pakistan standing any chance of raising a competitive squad for this year's T20 World Cup set to be held in India in October.

At the start of the South Africa series, it seemed there was little to separate the two sides. But as the tour continued, the visitors' superiority became obvious and the results are there for everyone to see. True, the hosts lost some of their best players to the Indian Premier League after the first two ODIs, but the Proteas young guns have proved to be no pushover either and Pakistan did well to tame them. Having said that, the Green Shirts' customary unpredictability was on display in the few games they lost and there remain serious questions regarding the middle order and the chequered performance of the fast bowlers. In the final analysis, this young team has shown signs of improvement but still has some way to go before it can play sharp, consistent cricket. The team's coaches Misbah-ul-Haq, Waqar Younis and Younus Khan hold the key to achieving that goal.

Vaccine shortfall

THE hope that the slew of Covid-19 vaccinations approved for use since the end of last year would vanquish the virus, or at least drastically curb infection levels, is dissipating very fast. Many countries are struggling with their third or fourth wave, more devastating than the last. The global death toll has crossed 3m even if the mortality rate has come down overall, because of improved medical protocols as health professionals gain experience of treating the disease. However, the rate of infection is rising faster than before. The inequitable availability of resources among nations in 'normal' times is reflected during this global health emergency as well. Poorer countries have far less access to vaccines than others, and, coupled with the fact that their health facilities are similarly inadequate, their populations are more likely to suffer serious and long-term effects of the contagion. Covax, the WHO's global shared vaccine programme which aims to make vaccines available to countries that cannot

afford the kind of financial outlay required to make successful bids for scarce supplies, is falling behind. Consider that within the period of a fortnight only 2m doses were cleared for shipment to 92 countries under the programme; during that time, the same number of vaccinations had been administered in the UK alone.

Uninterrupted supplies under Covax to around a third of the world population were largely dependent on India which has the world's largest vaccine-manufacturing capacity. However, in yet another illustration of the interconnectedness of the world in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic, the frightening surge of cases in India has thrown a spanner in the works. As it tries to ramp up its own inoculation programme for its massive population, India's vaccine production cannot keep pace. The country is now actually planning to import vaccines to meet the shortfall. That is worrying news for countries that were looking to Covax to meet their requirements. And that includes Pakistan. This country, along with Nigeria and Indonesia were slated to be among the biggest recipients of vaccines under Covax. It was announced in early March that 10m doses were to arrive in each country before June. Whether anything close to that figure materialises remains to be seen.

Countries that do have an adequate supply of vaccines and a population largely amenable to getting inoculated are sprinting ahead of many others. For example, in the UK over 32m have received at least one dose and some of the restrictions in that country have been eased after months. In Pakistan though, as in many other places, the UK variant is raging with the 'peak' nowhere in sight. Last week, the WHO warned that South Asia is at a "critical phase". Without a collective response to a global emergency of this nature, where wealthier nations look out for those less fortunate, one wonders how far it is possible to defeat the virus.

Another package

FEW will disagree that infrastructure across Sindh — from the megalopolis of Karachi to the districts in the interior of the province — is in a shambles. And while the centre and Sindh government never tire of blaming each other for the mess, neither has any viable plan to revamp this forsaken province. Moreover, while there are frequent announcements of 'development packages' for Sindh, these have failed to improve the situation.

On Friday, while visiting Sukkur, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced an ambitious plan for Sindh, designed to inject Rs446bn into the province. The money is supposed to be spent on restoring agricultural land, constructing a dam, building a motorway and bringing gas to villages, amongst other schemes. While Mr Khan was not entirely wrong in comparing parts of Sindh to Moenjodaro — arguably the ancient site had better planning and drainage facilities than many towns of the province do in the 21st century — it is sincerely hoped that the plans are meant to move backward areas beyond the realm of rhetoric. After all, the prime minister had last year announced a Rs1.1tr package for Karachi after heavy monsoon rains had destroyed the civic and drainage system of Pakistan's largest city. People of the metropolis are still waiting for those promises to be fulfilled.

Unfortunately, Sindh has not seen much development worth the name during the PPP's more than decade-long rule in the province. Both urban and rural areas are a picture of neglect, while even the PTI, which won the most seats from Karachi during the last general election, has worked no wonders in the port city. Perhaps the energies of both parties are invested more in putting each other down, rather than improving conditions in Sindh. While it is true that in the post-18th Amendment period the provincial administration has been granted maximum powers, the PPP has failed to use these for the betterment of Sindh. On the other hand, the centre's attempts to improve matters have come across as heavy-handed, and many see Islamabad as attempting to reimpose centralisation. The worst sufferers in this tug of war have been the people of Sindh. The fact is the PPP needs to hugely improve its game in the governance department, while the PTI can help provide the funds, advice etc to help modernise Sindh and give its people a much higher quality of life.

Saudi-Iran talks

EVER since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, ties between Tehran and Riyadh have been increasingly strained, affecting sectarian relations across the Muslim world. While before 1979 both were in the pro-American camp, after the fall of the Shah Iran embarked on a journey to 'export' its revolution, which obviously did not sit well with the Arab monarchies. After over four decades, the relationship remains tense, with proxy conflicts between the two being fought in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. However, despite the starkly different

ideologies both camps adhere to, coexistence is possible, should there be a desire to live with each other. A small example of this was recently witnessed in Iraq, where reportedly a low-level meeting between Saudi and Iranian officials was held to discuss the Yemen quagmire. There have been no relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran since the former broke off ties in 2016 after Riyadh executed Shaikh Baqir al-Nimr, a Saudi Shia cleric.

Though the talks in Iraq do not constitute a major breakthrough, they do prove that if both sides wish, engagement is possible. Saudi Arabia is quite keen to extricate itself from the Yemen crisis, where it has failed to dislodge the Iran-allied Houthis. Indeed, these parleys should be built on and carried forward, and perhaps the scope can later be expanded to the greater Saudi-Iranian rivalry playing out across the Middle East. Iraq can be a good interlocutor as it has relations with both sides; elements within its Shia-majority government have deep ties to Tehran, while as an Arab state Iraq shares cultural bonds with the Saudis. In fact it is desirable for states in the region to sort out their own issues. Military invasions and interventions by outside powers have only led to increased misery in the Middle East, while Israel is also keen to play up confessional and ethnic differences. If Riyadh and Tehran persist, they can succeed in establishing cordial relations and putting the hostility of the past behind them.

Media blackout

GOVERNMENTS in Pakistan somehow refuse to acknowledge the futility of imposing blanket bans on media coverage. It was therefore not surprising, though rather unfortunate, that the PTI government decided to go down this blind alley when violence flared up in Lahore on Sunday and the TLP cadres rampaged across the city for the entirety of the day.

The government used Pemra to forbid any coverage of the TLP failing which there could be consequences for the media. As the Pemra instructions applied to TV channels, this ban ensured that social media was the only source of information about the violence raging in the city.

With no filters for veracity, social media can be lethal if not countered with the process of verification through the mainstream media. This is what led to the TLP dominating the narrative even though much of what it was claiming may not have been accurate. Silence from government officials for the better part of the day

and the total absence of coverage from the mainstream media resulted in rumours and half-baked information circulating throughout the country. Video clips devoid of authenticity in terms of time and context also went viral thereby creating perceptions that may have different from reality. Due to the media blackout, the TLP was able to blame the police for the attack and the ensuing violence. It was only much later that the police could verify that in fact it was the TLP crowd that had attacked the police station and taken many policemen hostage.

The government must realise that blacking out media coverage through Pemra is an inadvisable option and leads to more harm than good. A free flow of information is the best way to counter rumour-mongering and fake news. The government always has the advantage of pushing through its narrative through the media by sharing facts and providing access to the media. All these advantages were frittered away when the government blundered into the blanket ban.

There is no doubt that the TLP has done grievous damage to its own cause by resorting to violence and the government must not dither from taking legal action against all those responsible for damage to life and property. In this day and age, stopping the flow of information is next to impossible, which is why smart governments leverage the power of the media to build perceptions, forge narratives and mould public opinion in support of their policies. In the current stand-off with the TLP, the government needs to make the case for its strategy and not allow the organisation to frame the issue from its own perspective. Had the government not blacked out media coverage, citizens could have seen for themselves how the TLP generated violence on the streets. At the same time, the government should utilise all options to negotiate with the TLP leadership so that the situation is brought under control.

Gas utilities' reluctance

THE government has 'ordered' state-owned gas companies SSGC and SNGPL to remove impediments hampering the development of the two new LNG terminals at Port Qasim to privately import gas for power, fertilisers, textiles, cement and some off-grid industries. The gas utilities — commonly known as Sui companies — have also been told to hold weekly meetings with the new terminal

developers for expediting the resolution of issues holding up progress on the new projects, which are considered essential for overcoming Pakistan's growing gas shortages. This is not the first time that the gas utilities have been asked to sort out issues with the proposed terminals' developers. Nor is it likely to be the last.

Several issues between the new terminal sponsors and the gas utilities are keeping the developers from taking their final investment decision, which would give us a clear deadline for the completion of these projects. But the key difference concerns the reluctance of the Sui companies to sign a gas transportation agreement with the developers. The utilities are strongly opposing allocation of the existing pipeline capacity to the new terminals before they come online. They argue that the pipeline capacity should be allocated on a first come, first-served basis "to create competition" in the market between existing and upcoming terminal operators. The Sui companies, it appears, are scared of losing their monopoly in the market and revenues to private competition as their big industrial customers will likely switch to private importers for cheaper imported gas. Hence, they are resisting the finalisation of GTAs. The new terminal developers are, on the other hand, not ready to start work on their projects unless they get firm and binding commitments, ensuring capacity allocation to them in the existing pipeline network once they come online till the time new gas transportation capacity is added to the system to move the fuel from their terminals to industrial customers in Karachi and Punjab. What if, for some reason, the gas companies refuse to allocate pipeline capacity to them after their completion? It is difficult to rule out this possibility in the absence of firm commitments. There is no easy solution to the dispute between the Sui utilities and the new terminal developers, more so because these differences of opinion also exist at the ministerial level. Unless the different ministries involved tackle these issues, it will be naïve to expect an expeditious resolution of the dispute anytime soon.

The digital divide

IN the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Inclusive Internet Index report, measuring internet inclusion in terms of availability, affordability, relevance and readiness, Pakistan's overall ranking has dropped to 90th place among 120 nations; the second lowest ranking country in Asia and the lowest in South Asia. In the midst of a global pandemic that has made the need for internet access

even more evident, the report warns that failure to improve conditions may widen inequalities between on- and offline populations. Though there are several improvements that Pakistan has made to improve internet access — chiefly in affordability due to market competition and lowering mobile phone costs — one of the most troubling figures is that of the digital gender parity.

Despite an improvement of six percentage points since the previous year, the report highlights that Pakistan still ranks the highest in the world when it comes to the gender gap. The gap in internet access between men and women is 65pc, and 51pc in access to mobile phones. This massive disparity has been noted in several other reports over the years, including the recent Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020 measuring mobile ownership and data usage in 15 low- and middle-income countries. In a study released in January, the non-profit Media Matters for Democracy found that six out of 10 women it surveyed faced restrictions at home when using the internet. Inequalities across income, geography and gender must be addressed holistically in Pakistan. Access to information is a fundamental right, yet the fact that there are still areas in this country without internet services despite the government's promises lays bare our commitment to this constitutional guarantee. Digital policies seem to lack ownership; rather, successive governments as well as state institutions have been more intent on policing the internet than enabling access and promoting its use to improve human development. The cost of this failure to imagine the economic possibilities and social empowerment that the internet opens up is ultimately being paid by the most disenfranchised among us.

More mishandling

THE TLP affair should have been handled better. It is fairly obvious now that the PTI government has run circles around itself while attempting to get a grip on the situation. The bizarre turn of events on Tuesday — with the government introducing a resolution in the National Assembly through a private member to debate the expulsion of the French ambassador — has brought Pakistan to a stage where it will be seen as pandering to the TLP while pretending to play smart tactics.

This becomes even more obvious when the resolution is contrasted with the speech that Prime Minister Imran Khan delivered on Monday in a bid to explain

his strategy. The crux of his argument was reasonable. He said that no Muslim would ever compromise on the finality of Prophethood, but this did not mean that one party should be allowed to monopolise the issue. He correctly pointed out that he had raised the matter at all international forums, including the UN, and therefore the objectives of his government and the TLP were the same, only the approach was different. The grave consequences of expelling the French ambassador from the country, as demanded by the TLP were also explained.

However, of what use was this effort? For the very next day, his government caved in. While yesterday's National Assembly resolution does not demand the expulsion of the ambassador, the very fact that the government has agreed to a debate on the issue is enough to extract a diplomatic cost. Unfortunately, this does not come as a surprise. From the start of the TLP protests, the government has made one mistake after another. The initial agreement with the TLP, in which the government had agreed in writing to the main demand of the right-wing outfit, was a major blunder. No government commits itself in writing to such demands from a pressure group without having to suffer the consequences.

When the TLP launched countrywide protests against the government's refusal to comply with its original agreement, the government at first let the law and order situation slip out of its hand, allowing the protesters to run amok, and then hastily announced a ban on the organisation. However, it then started to negotiate with the party it had banned and finally accepted its demands to a very dangerous extent, including the release of the TLP's leader.

To add to its self-created troubles, the government then launched critical barbs at the opposition instead of trying to forge a consensus on this sensitive issue. It is now important that the government brings transparency to all its dealings with the TLP including sharing what has been negotiated and agreed upon in letter and spirit. By its bad decision-making and weak management, the government has allowed the TLP to garner more importance and heft than it deserves.

Declining FDI

THE sharp decline in FDI in recent months is worrisome. New State Bank data shows that FDI has plummeted by a hefty 35pc to \$1.4bn year-on-year from July to March and by 40pc to 167.6m month-on-month in March. Although Covid-19 has led to a significant decrease in investment across the world during the last

one year as investors wait for the crisis to subside, the plunge in FDI flows is not a one-off event in Pakistan. We have seen investment tumble from 2017 as foreign investors, including Chinese companies, do not appear inclined to consider Pakistan as their favourite destination. That is not all. Many foreign firms have sold their businesses and exited Pakistan for good. The Italian oil and gas major, ENI, is the most recent example. Historically, FDI flows have constituted less than 1pc of the nation's GDP while comparable economies have attracted foreign investments equal to or over 3pc. The only time Pakistan saw an FDI 'boom' was during the mid-2000s when foreign investors brought their capital here to invest in the power, financial, oil & gas exploration and telecom sectors, and during the mid-2010s when China bankrolled expensive power and transport projects under the multibillion-dollar CPEC initiative. There were numerous reasons, such as energy shortages and poor security conditions, for the lacklustre response of foreign investors to attractive policy packages that successive governments announced in the last decade and a half to woo them.

Now, with the energy shortages taken care of and improved security conditions, the continuous decline in FDI flows underscores policy issues that the government must address to make this country attractive for foreign capital. This needs to be done urgently as the world is expected to return to normalcy before the end of 2022 as most people across the continents get inoculated against the coronavirus, and companies reconsider their investment plans for markets like Pakistan. With China becoming less attractive for global capital because of an aging population and increasing labour wages, both Chinese and Western firms are looking for new destinations. Luckily for Pakistan, Vietnam and Bangladesh have also lost some of their lustre for international investors. This leaves us with large room to market Pakistan's potential to foreign companies and influence their investment decisions. But for that to happen, the government will need to draw up a proper strategy and reform its policies to make them predictable and bring consistency to them.

No mining precautions

YET another accident caused by a methane gas explosion has been reported from the dangerous coal mines of Balochistan. Eight miners suffered serious burns when an explosion occurred in a private coal mine in the Dukki area. A portion of the mine collapsed, trapping the workers before they were rescued and

taken to the district hospital. The injured miners were incredibly lucky to have escaped with their lives. Only last month, at least 13 coal miners were burnt to death under similar circumstances when trapped methane gas exploded inside coal mines in Harnai district and the Marwar area in Bolan district. Meanwhile, in February last year, four workers were killed in a landslide in the Dukki mines. The frequency of deadly accidents in the country's coal mines can be gauged by the fact that last year there were at least 72 deadly incidents reported from Balochistan that claimed the lives of 100 colliers.

It is deeply unfortunate that despite the heavy casualty rate in the country's coal-mining sector, the deaths of poor workers seldom makes headlines. The colliers venture hundreds of feet deep inside the mines without any safety gear except for helmets and torches. They do not receive any prior training to overcome the extreme hazards of their occupation. It is only when an accident occurs that the government is stirred into action — only to come up with the lame excuse that it doesn't have enough resources to ensure the regular inspection of the mines or provide proper safety equipment. This perilous sector is responsible for many deaths that could have been prevented. Safety precautions including protective gadgets can save lives. However, the apathy demonstrated by both provincial and national authorities in building the capacities of the mining department, hiring more mines inspectors and penalising mine owners who do not ensure the safety of their employees is beyond comprehension. Prompt measures are needed to ensure that safety procedures are followed in the coal mines to prevent further injuries and loss of life.

Capping power debt

THE suggested revision in the Circular Debt Management Plan, which aims to cap the flow or addition of new debt to the power sector's existing debt stock of over Rs2.3tr by June 2023, seeks to avoid or at least delay an increase in electricity prices that has been agreed with the IMF for resumption of the Fund's \$6bn programme. The proposed hike of Rs4.50 per unit in the price will raise average power tariffs from Rs16.50 to Rs21. Since the amended Nepra Act has stripped the government of its powers to stop or delay notification passing on price increases to consumers, there is a new strategy in the revised plan to keep electricity rates at their current level, at least for now, to dodge the political fallout of such a massive spike. Yet, it will not be possible for it to entirely avoid the tariff

increase in spite of the planned rationalisation of sales tax on electricity sales and the fuel component of generation, as well as enhancement in the amount of consumer subsidy from the next fiscal year.

The power sector debt management strategy has many planks: the negotiated purchase of old, inefficient private generation plants, the closure of rundown public-sector generation, fresh capital investments in the distribution infrastructure etc. Besides, according to the sketchy details made public, the government intends to renegotiate the contracts with sponsors of the generation plants built or being built by Chinese investors for restructuring their project debt tenures over a longer period than the existing 10 years. It has already renegotiated deals with sponsors of IPPs set up under various pre-CPEC power policies since 1990 for reduction in their tariffs. The return on equity for the new public power companies has also been slashed. Once implemented, the proposed plan is expected to significantly cut system losses, improve bill recoveries and reduce the burden of capacity payments, ultimately capping the debt flow in addition to minimising the need for hiking electricity tariffs. The government estimates the existing circular debt stock to double to Rs4.6tr in two years in case no action is taken. It is claimed that the renegotiated power purchasing contracts with the non-Chinese IPPs have already saved consumers Rs1 per unit in tariffs.

Prima facie, the strategy, which the government should share with the people for the sake of transparency and debate, seems alright on paper. But it has “many variables and moving parts” that need to be implemented concurrently in order to deliver the desired results. Does the government have the ability to execute these measures considering it has already defaulted on its commitment to paying its first instalment of unpaid bills to the IPPs under revised deals with them because of NAB’s uncalled for intervention? Reneging on its promises will further dent the government’s credibility — trust is a prerequisite for seamlessly implementing the plan.

Istanbul postponement

WHILE the postponement of the Istanbul peace talks on Afghanistan, which were scheduled to be held later this week, does come as a dampener, it does not mean that the peace process is dead. In fact, global and regional powers will now

have to step up their efforts to ensure that the Afghan government and the insurgents continue the dialogue process and achieve a consensus acceptable to all in Afghanistan. At this point, the Afghan Taliban's lack of participation in the Istanbul parleys is being cited as the major reason for the event's postponement, while the Turkish foreign minister has said the talks had been put off till "after Ramazan". Apparently, the Taliban are posturing as the Biden administration has pushed back the withdrawal date of foreign troops from May 1 to Sept 11; the earlier date was agreed upon by the Taliban and the Trump administration after the two signed the Doha peace agreement in 2020. The Taliban have adopted the maximalist position that they will not participate in any peace negotiations until foreign forces leave Afghanistan, though Pakistan has urged the militia to stay engaged.

At this critical juncture, the Taliban can play hardball and avoid the negotiating table, rendering years of painstaking diplomatic efforts meaningless as Afghanistan plunges back into anarchy. However, the alternative is for the armed group to keep channels open and reach a power-sharing agreement with the Afghan government and other stakeholders in the country. Perhaps Pakistan and other Muslim states — the Arabs, Turkey, Iran — can ramp up diplomatic efforts to ensure that the Taliban do not walk away from the peace process. It should be clear that achieving peace will require compromises from all Afghan power players, and the 'all or nothing' approach will only pile more misery upon the hapless Afghan people. With a mix of carrots and sticks, there is a fair chance of convincing the Taliban. Moreover, foreign forces must also honour their commitments and withdraw as per the new deadline, while the government in Kabul must show that it is ready to defend the whole country without foreign support. The brief window of opportunity for achieving peace in Afghanistan is closing, and it is not known when — or if — the next one will open. Therefore, an increased diplomatic push by foreign powers and internal efforts by the Afghans themselves are required to grab the opportunity before it slips away yet again.

TTP resurgence?

IN a brazen attack that claimed five lives, the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan targeted the Serena Hotel in Quetta on Wednesday. The high-profile hit is a frightening reminder of the group's ability to unleash terror. The attack followed the typical TTP modus operandi: the attacker drove an explosive-laden

vehicle into the hotel's parking lot and detonated the bomb. What is of concern is that the vehicle used in the attack was stopped for routine inspection that is carried out at security checkpoints at hotels.

This means the bomber went to great lengths to disguise the explosives and hoodwink security personnel at the checkpoint. The hotel already has significant security measures in place — which makes this attack all the more audacious. Though initial reports linked the attack to the presence of the Chinese ambassador in the city, it appears no foreign officials were harmed and that the diplomat may not have been the target.

At this stage, it appears the TTP's purpose was to create chaos. It is well known in Quetta that dignitaries and citizens congregate at the hotel after taraweeh prayers in Ramazan, so such an attack would no doubt have the desired impact of creating fear and panic. Isolated attacks claimed by the TTP in Quetta and in North Waziristan are not uncommon, but the targeting of a high-security location has sparked fears of a TTP resurgence. The terrorist group's network was dismantled to a large extent after successive military operations in recent years, leaving it confined to pockets in North Waziristan and parts of Balochistan.

Even now, security forces conduct routine intelligence-based operations in both the north and south of the country to eliminate the terrorism threat. Wednesday's attack underscores the need for continued vigilance and heightened security. While there may be considerable truth to the officials' claim that a foreign hand is involved in attacks of this nature, better intelligence and improved investigation into how such an incident took place are imperative. Does the TTP have local abettors and sympathisers? Had the group been surveilling the hotel to detonate the bomb at a time when the presence of visitors would be considerable?

While there is no doubt that terrorism has sharply decreased in the country in recent years, an attack like this reinforces the reality that militant groups continue to find some support. Before the APS attack, the TTP had unleashed a reign of terror attacking schools, targeting law-enforcement officials and orchestrating kidnappings. The state's swift and unambiguous response weakened the Taliban — but clearly, though broken and splintered, its ideology and capabilities have not been eradicated. Pakistan has suffered a great deal at the hands of militants, and terrorism has destroyed immense human and economic capital. The government and military must ensure that their focus and resources are focused on dismantling terror networks that still exist.

Tehran visit

THE two key takeaways from Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi's trip to Iran on Wednesday were the need for better border security and trade relations between Islamabad and Tehran. The meeting with President Hassan Rouhani was cordial, with the Iranian leader stressing that "security is a common concern" for both states while also adding that bilateral trade activities needed to be further improved. The fact is that the Pakistan-Iran relationship, though amiable for the most part, has not been able to grow to its full potential. There are various reasons for this, most of them being geopolitical. While both states share a long border and centuries of cultural, linguistic and religious ties, these links have failed to translate into robust bilateral trade relations. President Rouhani hinted at "unimplemented agreements" standing in the way of better trade ties, specifically mentioning the stalled Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. Pakistan has been wary of attracting US sanctions and annoying friends and benefactors in the Arab world by getting too close to Iran in the post-1979 era. However, it needs to explain to its friends that one relationship does not need to come at the cost of the other.

Official Pakistan-Iran trade is only in the region of a few hundred million dollars. This figure can grow manifold if both states decide to significantly improve trade ties. For example, there is a thriving informal border trade in Balochistan. If this were formalised and the requisite facilities provided in this underdeveloped part of the country, it could bring jobs to the impoverished region. The recent deaths of Zamyad drivers in the border area due to hunger and thirst point to the appalling fact that barely any facilities exist in this desolate region. This can change if both Iran and Pakistan decide to enhance bilateral trade through Balochistan. While the opening of a third border crossing at Pishin-Mand is a welcome move, many more such points are required, along with infrastructure — roads, utilities, shops catering to the needs of traders and travellers — to facilitate trade. If trade brings with it economic prosperity, security concerns can also be lessened as locals on both sides of the border are provided employment. The two countries need to work on a joint roadmap to promote trade, while Pakistan specifically needs to tell those who may be unsettled by the thought of better ties with Iran that there is no reason for concern.

Road to racial justice

THE death of George Floyd last May caused global shock and outrage, and led to mass protests in both the US and countries around the world. For nine minutes and 29 seconds — most of it recorded by horrified bystanders — Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, knelt on the neck of the 49-year-old black man in the process of ‘restraining’ him, watching the life drain out of Floyd despite his and witnesses’ desperate pleas, as fellow officers stood by, only letting up once physically removed by paramedics. On Tuesday, a jury found Chauvin guilty of murder. Many have expressed a sense of relief, though Minnesota’s attorney general and lead prosecutor for the case was quick to remind Americans that the verdict did not represent justice — “because justice implies true restoration” — but accountability.

More sobering words could not have been spoken at this time. Less than an hour before the Chauvin verdict was announced, police shot and killed a 16-year-old black girl in Ohio. Just days earlier, newly released video footage of the March 29 death of a 13-year-old Latino boy revealed that he had his arms raised when a Chicago cop fired on him. Meanwhile, there has been a significant uptick of mass shootings in the US in the past month, with the most high-profile of them perpetrated by men radicalised by white supremacist ideology. Yet it is historically disenfranchised, racialised communities that bear the brunt of disproportionate, often lethal, force by the police. Whether the US is willing to embark as a nation on the long road to racial justice remains to be seen. But the legacy of racism and colonialism and its fallouts — such as impunity for police brutality affecting the most vulnerable and vilified members of society — are not uniquely American phenomena. Here at home, too, we must confront our complacent tendency to excuse abuses of power, torture and extrajudicial killings. ‘Security’ paid for with innocent blood will only perpetuate this cycle of violence.

Russia-West tension

AT the height of the Cold War, both sides indulged in a regular exchange of rhetoric, characterising each other in less than flattering terms. The capitalist West termed the Soviet Union an ‘evil empire’ leading a godless Eastern bloc,

while the communists berated the ‘decadent, imperialist’ West. The verbal exchanges were of course apart from the much more dangerous nuclear posturing and proxy wars across the planet. Now, it seems the ghosts of the Cold War have been revived as Russia and its Western nemeses indulge in a fresh bout of verbal jousting. Delivering a major policy speech in Moscow recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a stern warning to the West, telling it not to cross a “red line”, adding that Russia’s response would be “asymmetrical, rapid and harsh”. Last month, US President Joe Biden had, in rather tough fashion, called Mr Putin, a “killer”, to which the Russian leader acerbically replied: “it takes one to know one.”

There are numerous global hotspots where Russia and the Western bloc’s policies are diametrically opposed. These include Ukraine, Belarus and Syria, to name a few. In the post-Soviet period Russia has been alarmed by Nato’s expansion in the former Eastern bloc countries, which it considers part of its ‘near abroad’. On the other hand, the US-led West has been critical of a resurgent Russia throwing its military weight around in places such as Crimea and Syria. Up till recently the situation in Ukraine remained tense, as Moscow had amassed a large number of troops near the former Soviet republic. Both camps need to realise that Cold War-era posturing and a combative relationship do not bode well for global peace. The US must come to terms with the fact that Russia is a sovereign power and must be handled with respect. Moscow, on the other hand, should also communicate to its European neighbours as well as Washington that all outstanding issues should be resolved through diplomacy instead of sabre-rattling.

Never-ending poverty

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has long been stressing the need to ramp up efforts to reduce poverty in the country. On Thursday, he once again reminded his administration that the performance of his government will be evaluated by voters in the next elections on the basis of its success in tackling poverty, and claimed that KP had re-elected the PTI because it had managed to lift a large number of people out of poverty in its first term in that province. Unfortunately, for all his emphasis on giving relief to the people, Pakistan has been losing the fight against poverty. The number of poor living below the national poverty line has actually grown rapidly under the PTI owing to the ongoing economic slowdown

made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic. The IMF has recently predicted that the percentage of population living in poverty will grow to 40pc from (as per official claims) 24.3pc in 2015. Other global lenders too have made similar projections. Thus, we may soon see nearly 85m Pakistanis living in poverty, up by 30m from around 55m only five years ago. It's a big jump by any standard, especially when we have a party in power that claims to have lifted a large number of poor people out of poverty in KP.

Pakistan has a long history of formulating and implementing poverty reduction programmes. But the rising poverty levels reflect poorly on the strategies adopted to fight a deep-rooted problem. Besides poor policy formulation, the lack of resources, bureaucratic lethargy and inefficient execution of so-called pro-poor interventions are also to blame for the failure of efforts to bring down poverty levels. Moreover, successive governments have mostly concentrated on immediate results to get political mileage rather than addressing the multidimensional vulnerabilities that perpetuate poverty. For example, the disbursement of cash among the poor under the Ehsaas programme is important for reducing hardship and supporting income. It is, however, foolish to expect that it will alleviate poverty. Little wonder then that we see socioeconomic vulnerabilities increase over time as the poor continue to be denied access to education, health, capital, drinking water, sanitation, etc. Indeed, the country has witnessed the number of poor decrease in periods of higher economic growth. However, increasing socioeconomic vulnerabilities and inequalities mean that an unexpected shock like a sudden dip in growth or a pandemic such as Covid-19 would push the vulnerable groups back into abject poverty.

For a sustainable reduction in poverty the government must formulate a long-term, comprehensive programme to attack different dimensions of poverty through increased pro-poor expenditure rather than focusing on income-support interventions only. Many a time, the prime minister has pledged to 'learn' from the successful Chinese experience of dealing with poverty and replicate it in Pakistan to get the same results. Now is the time for him to walk the talk.

Shehbaz's return

AFTER nearly seven months in jail, PML-N president and leader of the opposition Shehbaz Sharif has been released on bail. As he is welcomed home,

the days ahead will bring an enormous challenge both for his party and the larger opposition. With his return, two critical points need to be addressed.

The first is the power dynamic within the Sharif family. Shehbaz Sharif was arrested in September 2020, just days after the opposition united against the government to create the PDM and his older brother Nawaz Sharif made a scathing speech against the top brass of the security establishment. In the PML-N president's absence, Maryam Nawaz was the face of the party, filling in for the senior Sharif brother with both her public appearances and her narrative.

It is understood that the senior Sharif will now take over from Ms Nawaz, and lead the party in its anti-government movement. Given Ms Nawaz's mass public appeal and authoritative rhetoric, are the party and its support base prepared for a switch in tone? It is no secret that Shehbaz Sharif does not subscribe to the PML-N's stinging narrative about the role of the security establishment in politics. In the past, his preference has been to choose the path of least resistance — a position that contrasts sharply with the mood of the party today. Will the opposition leader be able to reconcile with the direction the party has taken since he was jailed? Undoubtedly, it is a tough situation, and though the narrative of the party may prevail, it remains to be seen how much he will assert himself at this pivotal moment.

As Shehbaz Sharif confronts these changes, the larger challenge of a fractured alliance and warring opposition also looms. A lot has transpired in the period that he was away. The PDM went from being a formidable force to a shadow of its former self. The very public spat between the PML-N and PPP and the latter's departure from the alliance, too, has diluted the impact of the anti-government drive.

Mr Sharif's release also coincides with a deepening crisis in the country, as inflation and the coronavirus batter the economy and life itself. The challenge for Mr Sharif is considerable: not only does he have the task of configuring family dynamics ahead of him, he must also reconcile party viewpoints internally — all the while holding the government accountable in his role as opposition leader.

Cleaner energy

PAKISTAN has pledged to the world that it will drastically reduce its reliance on fossil fuels by shifting to cleaner energy sources and encouraging electric vehicles. The SAPM on climate change assured the international community during a US-hosted virtual conference that the country will shift to 60pc clean energy and convert 30pc of its overall vehicular fleet to electricity by 2030. That is a tall order given that renewable sources, barring hydropower, constitute only a fraction of the nation's overall energy mix, and issues such as infrastructural impediments, higher upfront costs and range anxiety are likely to keep consumers from shifting to electric vehicles for many years. Besides, the government is yet to fully align its climate change goals with its power and automotive strategies even though it has separately drawn up EV and alternative energy policies. For example, the long-term plan prepared by the NTDC last year totally ignored the renewable energy option in favour of dirty fossil fuels without taking into account the cost of their impact on the environment. Likewise, some ministers appear reluctant to encourage cheaper, environment-friendly hybrid technology as a way to encourage a shift to green electric technology.

Indeed, the shift to cleaner fuels is crucial to slow down climate changes affecting food security across the globe. But that is not enough. Countries like Pakistan, which are affected the most by the changing climate, need to go beyond measures aimed at slowing down environmental degradation and promote policies that target the reversal of damage already done. One of those measures would include helping farmers switch to modern irrigation and seed technologies for conserving depleting water resources for the future. In fact, unless the government formulates an umbrella policy that covers all sectors of the economy and all segments of the population, it will not be able to win the climate war. The execution of different policies in silos will not work or produce the desired results. By making big pledges at the conference, the government has already fired the starting pistol. The ambitious targets spelled out at the conference will have no hope of being met without a comprehensive effort. There's no doubt that developing countries are also looking towards major economies responsible for global warming for financial assistance to tackle the problem. But they cannot sit still, waiting for the promised help to arrive. It is time they joined the race.

India's Covid disaster

INDIA is in the midst of a cataclysmic Covid-19 nightmare that has unleashed unimaginable suffering on its people. The stats are getting grimmer by the day; after claims earlier in the year that the government had 'beaten' the virus with new cases down to 11,000 a day, this week India recorded the world's highest single-day coronavirus cases at 332,730. The overall death toll at 190,000 is staggering, with 2,624 deaths recorded in 24 hours on Saturday alone. The accounts coming from across the border are truly heartbreaking: there are desperate pleas for oxygen with patients begging doctors for treatment outside emergency wards as others breathe their last; death is occurring in plain sight; makeshift crematoriums are being created in parking lots to deal with the deluge of bodies. With hospitals exceeding their capacity and the collapse of the healthcare infrastructure, doctors across India are exhausted from swimming against an all-consuming current. Thousands are dying a slow death each day due to the lack of oxygen and medication — many of these lives could have been saved had it not been for the deplorable lack of leadership.

India's Covid-19 story did not have to be this horror show. But complacency, denial, and an utter disregard for science and data pushed millions into a crippling crisis. As early reports of mutated strains and their high transmissibility surfaced, the Narendra Modi government continued with its grandstanding. Instead of chalking out a plan to vaccinate Indians first, the government was quick to secure deals to export the vaccine. The result is almost too painful to bear: citizens of the world's largest vaccine manufacturer are dying by the thousands. Meanwhile, superspreader gatherings such as election rallies in West Bengal and the Kumbh Mela were allowed to continue. The role of BJP leaders here has been criminal. Just a month ago, the party encouraged supporters to attend the Kumbh festival, falsely claiming it to be safe. In Uttarakhand, the chief minister went as far as to say that "faith in God will overcome the fear of the virus". It was only a few days ago that Prime Minister Modi announced the cancellation of pre-election roadshows, when criticism against his government's handling of the crisis intensified.

It is because of this absence of leadership that India has become a cautionary tale for others in the region. In Pakistan, where Covid-19 cases are climbing at an alarming rate and hospitals in the capital are at capacity, the government

appears to be sleepwalking into a similar disaster. Poor vaccine rollout, a creaking healthcare system and blatant disregard for SOPs could spell doom in a matter of weeks. The government's strategy that it will implement a lockdown only if the system collapses is appalling. If authorities do not reconsider this strategy and act fast, the coming weeks will bring relentless pain and suffering.

Digitising parliament

IN a meeting on the President's Initiative for Cyber Efficient Parliament on Wednesday, President Arif Alvi expressed his desire to see parliamentary operations completely digitised by January 2023. In the first phase of this initiative, the minister for information technology and telecommunication has said, agendas of sessions of both houses of parliament and their committees, motions, proceedings, etc would be presented through a computerised system. Though there are not enough details at present to scrutinise the plan in depth, and there are likely to be implementation challenges (such as cybersecurity, data protection and technology literacy among parliamentarians) the drive to automate operations is in general a welcome move towards modernising and streamlining parliamentary procedures and records management.

Moreover, besides making the work of parliament more efficient, this effort can lay the groundwork for increasing transparency and public participation with their elected representatives. A fully digitised information management system can provide interesting opportunities to expand and improve the way that open data is made available to citizens. An accessible, searchable public dashboard that is updated in real time, for example, and which eventually includes digitised archives of past sessions of the National Assembly and Senate and members' voting records, can prove to be a much greater resource for journalists, researchers and the general voting public than government websites in their current state. Several studies have found that a key barrier in greater citizen engagement is knowledge of how parliament works. Used strategically, technology can bridge the gap between constituents and parliamentarians, enhancing decision-making and promoting civic education. Both governmental and non-governmental initiatives (such as the UK's TheyWorkForYou) have shown promising results in this regard. But an increasing reliance on technology can also widen inequalities between online and offline populations unless also supplemented with a holistic strategy to improve digital literacy and internet

access. There is plenty of potential in digitising parliament, provided that the key aims of building transparency, trust and participation remain in the foreground.

Taliban's obstinacy

IN the backdrop of the postponed Istanbul peace talks on Afghanistan — put off for the time being because the Afghan Taliban refused to attend — the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Turkey and Afghanistan have issued a call to the armed group not to let this opportunity pass them by.

Speaking under the banner of the 'Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan trilateral,' the trio called on all parties, "in particular the Taliban" to reaffirm their commitment to the peace process. The Taliban had said they would not be participating in the Istanbul meeting, which was scheduled for this month, until all foreign forces leave their country, referring to the American decision to delay the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan till September. The Turkish foreign minister said the meeting would likely be convened after Eid.

The fact of the matter is that the Taliban are an integral part of the Afghan puzzle, and without their participation the peace process is unlikely to succeed. The Western-backed government in Kabul, supported by Nato's firepower, has tried to defeat the militia for decades militarily, and has not achieved encouraging results. Therefore, the only way out of the Afghan quagmire is a negotiated settlement in which all stakeholders — political, tribal, ethnic, religious — have representation. However, the Taliban must realise that while they have managed to survive for around 20 years, a war without an end will do little to pull their people out of misery and poverty. Even more virulent actors, such as the local chapter of the militant Islamic State group, are ready to grab ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan to implement their violent agendas. Therefore, to end the 'forever war', Afghan stakeholders need to show vision and maturity.

As has been suggested previously in these columns, other regional Muslim states must support Pakistan's and Turkey's efforts to convince the Taliban to attend the Istanbul peace process. Moreover, the three foreign ministers in their statement reiterated the need for an immediate ceasefire to create "a conducive atmosphere" for peace parleys, while they also deplored the high level of civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

From here on, the burden is on the Taliban: they can either prolong the decades-long Afghan nightmare, or they can choose to participate in the peace process and arrive at a compromise with their rivals to help usher in an era of stability in their country. Foreign adventurers — from the Soviets to the Americans — have played a major role in destabilising Afghanistan. But now it is for the main Afghan players, specifically the government in Kabul and the Taliban, to take responsibility for their country and help start the process of rebuilding. If whatever little semblance of order that remains in Afghanistan collapses, the worst sufferers will be the people of that country who have watched a variety of local and foreign actors play violent power games in their beleaguered land.

Centre-Sindh ties

POLITICAL polarisation in the country extracts a cost from governance. It is therefore heartening to see the governor and chief minister of Sindh making an effort to reduce tension and form a constructive working relationship. The two top office holders of the province met recently to discuss important issues pertaining to governance. Similarly, President Arif Alvi also met Governor Imran Ismail in Karachi and stressed the need for dialogue to resolve Sindh's issues. This is the right approach to adopt at a time when the government and opposition are unable to form a functional working relationship. There are various bones of contention between the federal government of PTI and the Sindh government of PPP that require sustained engagement between officials from both sides. The islands issue, in which the federal government wants to develop two islands off the coast of Sindh through bringing in foreign investment, remains unresolved. Prime Minister Imran Khan has been taking a personal interest in this issue but the Sindh government maintains that the federal government has no jurisdiction over the islands. Both sides should take advantage of the relative lowering of political temperatures to engage with each and try find a solution. Similarly another issue pertaining to the ownership of hospitals in Karachi also requires a constructive approach so that the citizens do not suffer because of a tussle between the two governments. Even in terms of the ambitious Karachi package that was announced last year, there remains a lack of coordination that is adversely affecting its proper implementation. Governance in Sindh has remained a challenging issue in the past due to the split mandate between the PPP and parties such as the MQM. Since the 2018 elections, the PTI has also become an important stakeholder in the province. It is therefore all the more

important that the PPP and PTI forge a good working relationship that can facilitate governance in the province.

The president can use his good offices to push for greater coordination between these stakeholders. The fact that he himself hails from Karachi, and served as an MNA in the last term, means that he is fully acquainted with the problems and issues that afflict the province as well as the way it is governed. He has done well to send a positive message and he should remain engaged in order to help the PTI and PPP work together. Sindh deserves no less.

Tokyo Games countdown

WITH the 100-day countdown to the Tokyo Olympics commencing a few days back, the organisers and the Japanese government are putting up a brave face and reiterating their resolve to hold the Games as planned. However, they know that this is easier said than done. The recent spike in coronavirus cases worldwide is posing a huge challenge to their goal while opinion polls in Japan reveal that most of the population would like to see the Olympics either cancelled or postponed. The Games, already a year late, are set to be held from July 23 to Aug 8. The Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto recently said that cancellation is not an option and that the Olympics will, in fact, be a celebration of solidarity, unity and resilience. As one might expect from the world's third-largest economy, the venues and stadiums are ready to host various disciplines in the mega affair, but the spike in infections has disrupted several events leading up to the Olympics including the torch relay. Australia's diving team on Friday withdrew from the Diving World Cup scheduled for May 1-6 in Tokyo, saying it was "not safe" to travel to Japan. Among other events scheduled for next month, the marathon swim Olympic qualifier has been moved to Portugal and the artistic gymnastics test event has been cancelled because of restrictions on international travellers.

The Games organisers have already announced strict measures for spectators and athletes, which include reducing the size of Olympics delegations, adhering to strict standards of hygiene, social distancing, testing, etc. It was quite incredible then that they said vaccinations were not mandatory for participants — against the advice of many experts. Overall, there are 33 sporting and 339 medal events that will be contested at the Tokyo Games which are being billed as the

best in the history of the modern Olympics. But despite the Games being just three months away, the fate of the biggest sporting spectacle on earth still hangs in the balance.

Quiet diplomacy

IT has now been confirmed that officials from the Pakistani and Indian governments are engaged in quiet talks aimed at reducing tension in the region and resolving outstanding conflicts, including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir. According to a report in this newspaper, officials have confirmed that the two adversaries have been holding a backchannel dialogue since 2017.

However, in December last year, the talks went into higher gear when the Indian side approached the Pakistani government for a deeper engagement. The Pakistani leadership responded favourably, and as a result, a number of confidence-building measures have come to the fore, including a ceasefire agreement at the Line of Control. Pakistani officials say there is a genuine desire to move towards a peaceful resolution of disputes in order for Pakistan to achieve internal and external stability. So far the talks are being held between senior intelligence officials from both sides. It is said that relevant experts may join these talks once the agenda moves on to specific items. For now, these are talks about talks.

But they should be welcomed. Pakistan and India cannot afford to go to war and the lesson of 2019 is that both are closer to a conflict than they might want to admit. The only way to ensure a conflagration does not break out is to make a genuine and sincere attempt at resolving disputes that can potentially trigger a conflict. However, both Islamabad and New Delhi have been down this path numerous times before, with very little to show for it. The lessons learnt, if any, are that the two sides should move gradually and not rush into solutions. There are strong and influential lobbies on both sides that can act as spoilers. It is therefore reasonable for these talks to remain quiet and discreet till there is enough confluence of positions that can be brought into the glare of the public. In Pakistan, past attempts have floundered because of differences of approach between the civil and military leaderships. If the current talks have to be meaningful, it might be important to ensure not just that Rawalpindi and Islamabad are in lockstep, but also that other political parties are brought into the

loop. There should be a broad consensus across the political spectrum on this strategic initiative so that it does not fall victim to petty politicking.

In addition, past lessons also tell us that such major policies should not be confined to individual decision-makers but should have a buy-in from all relevant institutions so that they do not remain dependent on personal priorities. The present leadership that is piloting this new, bold and timely move to give peace a chance should invest time and effort in forging a broad consensus around this policy. South Asia deserves a better future.

Misplaced euphoria

THE government is in a state of euphoria and is citing the current account surplus as a successful attempt at stabilising the economy and plugging the erosion of forex reserves. Certainly, the surplus of \$959m in the first three quarters of the present fiscal year is a significant improvement over the deficit of \$4.147bn a year ago. But we need to pause here and consider the factors that have contributed majorly to the current account surplus and analyse the recent emerging trends that may reverse the situation going forward. The surplus achieved so far can largely be credited to the increased inflow of dollars in the shape of remittances and exports of IT services through formal banking channels in recent months, mainly because of international travel restrictions related to Covid-19 and improved compliance with FATF conditions. Likewise, the restrictions are also attributed to decreased dollar outflows with fewer Pakistanis travelling abroad for leisure, business or pilgrimage. The question is whether these inflows will be sustained once the world returns to normal.

We also need to take into account the returning trend of the current account deficit since December. Even though the cumulative deficit during the last two months has shrunk to just \$78m from \$854m in December and January — again because of rising remittances and IT exports — it depicts an emerging trend on the back of augmented imports of oil, machinery, steel products and raw material as the economy picks up. Moreover, the food import bill is also spiking owing to domestic wheat and sugar shortages. On the other hand, the country's exports are slow to grow and unlikely to cover the rise in the import bill anytime soon. That is not all. The financial account of the balance of payments, which had been in surplus since July, has again turned into a deficit of more than \$1.4bn in the

last three months as foreign direct investment plummets by 35pc, equity investors pull out their money from stocks, foreign debt payments jack up and outflows of amortisation and other transactions grow. Thus the overall balance-of-payments position, though improved, remains delicate. The government needs to look at the whole picture rather than focusing on just one aspect. A stable external sector demands that the government take urgent action to fix agriculture, loosen the noose around the economy to help growth, and develop industrial infrastructure to attract foreign investors and boost exports.

T20 series win

MANY would say that the Pakistan cricket team is synonymous with 'unpredictability'. Certainly, their sketchy performance against the lowly ranked Zimbabwe in the recent T20 series held in Harare reflects this. The three-match series that went down to the wire saw Babar Azam's men win by the skin of their teeth as they struggled to post competitive scores on the board. They even got dismissed inside 100 runs once. This performance was in sharp contrast to their fine display against a much stronger South Africa just two weeks ago; the Green Shirts had clinched back-to-back ODI and T20 series. Both critics and fans had predicted a 3-0 whitewash for Pakistan against the 11th-ranked Zimbabwe, though they ought to have realised that consistency has never been the hallmark of Pakistan cricket teams. Pakistan's overdependence on skipper Babar Azam's and wicketkeeper-batsman Mohammad Rizwan's form for most of their victories in recent months was once again evident against Zimbabwe. None of the other batsmen made an impression while the bowlers, too, failed to pose any real challenge to the opposition. Though Hasan Ali's four wickets in the last game was indeed a match-winning effort, all in all Pakistan failed to get their act together as a team which should be of serious concern to the team management and the Pakistan Cricket Board.

Given their chequered form and brittle nerves in pressure games, the team may not stand a chance against leading teams such as England, Australia and India that have formidable squads and have taken limited-overs cricket to a different level altogether. According to experts, Pakistan has not progressed as they should have. The side is still stuck in the 1980s style of cricket, wasting too many scoring opportunities and lagging behind due to their inability to develop pinch hitters who could quickly change the complexion of a match. A change of

mindset, therefore, is imperative if Pakistan is to be counted among the major contenders for the World T20 title later this year.

Exam postponement

AFTER declaring unequivocally, in the face of increasing criticism, that the A-Levels and O-Levels examinations would be held on time, the federal government has taken yet another U-turn and declared all exams postponed till June 15 and the A-Levels and O-Levels till October. Federal Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood, who has been piloting decisions about school closures and exams, announced at a press conference that the government had decided to postpone the examinations because of the rapid rise of Covid-19 infections. However, till Tuesday, the minister had been insisting that the decision to let the exams take place was the final one. When students and parents across the country protested against the danger this adamancy by the education minister was placing the students in, and when many political leaders also joined the chorus, he dug in his heels even further. This forced tens of thousands of students to sit the examinations on Monday and Tuesday. However, on Tuesday, the minister took a U-turn and cancelled the decision that he had stood by so firmly.

For once, however, this U-turn by the PTI government should be welcomed. The minister was wrong in insisting that exams proceed at a time when the third wave of Covid-19 is wreaking havoc across the country. He has done right by righting his wrong. His decision was needlessly placing students in danger and dramatically increasing the chances of the infection spreading even further at a time when positivity rates are in double figures, hospitals are groaning under the pressure of patients and oxygen supplies are getting dangerously depleted. But while this U-turn by the federal government is a welcome one, it has come at a cost. The students and their parents have had to endure weeks of agonising uncertainty, educational institutions have had to make hurried preparations while facing the danger of the pandemic and the courts have had to entertain multiple petitions on the issue. All this could have been avoided had the federal education minister handled the matter with greater maturity. He should have had a greater level of consultation with all stakeholders and also taken into account how this issue was being handled by other countries. The U-turn will save the students from the danger of the infection but it should not stop Prime Minister Imran Khan

from taking his education minister to task for his gross mismanagement of the issue.

Historic turnaround

A MANIFESTLY ill-intentioned legal saga has come to a close in a historic turnaround. In a 6-4 majority decision, the Supreme Court on Monday accepted all the review petitions, except one filed by Justice Qazi Faez Isa himself, against its verdict on June 19, 2020, in the presidential reference against the judge.

Specifically, the petitions concerned the bizarre directions in the earlier judgement — which had otherwise quashed the reference as being “tainted” — ordering the FBR to conduct an inquiry into offshore properties owned by Justice Isa’s wife. Those directions have now been “recalled and set aside”, and all steps taken in response to them declared “illegal and without any legal effect”. For the Supreme Court to review its decisions is rare, and it is rarer still when a 10-member bench had passed the original decision. The significance of this development cannot be overstated. It is far more than a resounding victory for the apex court judge: it is a triumph of the rule of law and constitutionalism when they seemed to be on increasingly shaky ground.

Judicial reviews are usually sedate proceedings where only points of law regarding the original verdict are discussed. In this case however, the bench undertook a broader examination of the case, going back to the impetus behind the presidential reference itself. Over the course of the proceedings, a sharp divide among the superior judiciary became evident, most notably when the judges differed over the amount of time allowed the government lawyer to present his arguments. While dissent among judges helps in shaping the law and adding nuance to judgements, such a division can also suggest deeper tensions at play. Allowing one of their brother judges to be unjustly persecuted would have left the judiciary as a whole vulnerable; that the majority opinion was converted into a minority one indicates that this view — and perhaps conscience — prevailed in the end.

The verdict also serves as an object lesson for those who tried to pervert the law and the concept of accountability to malign and excise from the bench a judge unafraid to call them out for their excesses. One need only glance through the Faizabad sit-in judgement to understand the genesis of the presidential

reference. For the government, clearly willing to go any distance required to stay on 'one page' — even to the extent of risking a schism within the highest court in the land — the denouement is an unalloyed debacle, leaving behind a stain it will find difficult to wash away. This was not a matter about one individual, but about silencing an institution that performs as a check and balance on the exercise of power. Among the myriad takeaways to be gleaned from the verdict, one of them is this: resistance to coercive tactics is growing, in civil society, media and the legal fraternity. But will anyone take heed?

Jerusalem protests

THE holy city of Jerusalem was shaken by several nights of protests over the last several days as Palestinian citizens faced off against Israeli security forces over access to the Al Aqsa mosque. The situation was exacerbated when a far-right Jewish group staged a provocative march in the disputed city in which extremists chanted “death to Arabs”. While the Israeli administration said it had restricted Palestinians’ access to the mosque due to ‘coronavirus restrictions’, the Arabs felt this was a ruse to prevent them from gathering at Al Aqsa. The barricades blocking access to the mosque have been removed, but not after over 100 Palestinians were wounded in the clashes.

The recent violence illustrates that Jerusalem/Al Quds remains a flashpoint, despite illegal Israeli attempts to annex the holy city, while the threat to peace posed by radical Jewish groups is also very high. The fact is that no Palestinian faction will be willing to give up claims on the holy city, despite intense pressure from powerful foreign actors. A statement from the Palestinian presidency termed East Jerusalem “the eternal capital of Palestine and ... a red line”, indicating that any attempts to restrict access to the city will be resisted. Moreover, the vicious attacks of extremist Jewish groups targeting Palestinians need to end immediately. The Israeli state wastes no time in raining down bombs on men, women and children in Gaza if rockets are fired at the Jewish state from the Strip. However, Tel Aviv tends to treat murderous settler groups with kid gloves, even though some harbour a clearly genocidal agenda against Arabs. But expecting Israel to treat Palestinians with dignity and respect and to punish their tormentors is asking too much. After all, Israel itself has been guilty of crimes against humanity targeting Palestinians and its own Arab population, as Human Rights Watch has recently noted. This is something Tel Aviv’s staunch defenders

and supporters in the West, as well as those in the Muslim world rushing to establish relations with it, must explain.

Army deployment

IT is not a moment too soon for Pakistan to take extraordinary measures against the spread of Covid-19 within its borders. Reports emerging from India, showing horrific scenes of people dying on the street gasping for breath, offer a glimpse of what could lie in store for us if we continue to treat SOPs in a cavalier manner.

A few days ago, Prime Minister Imran Khan had said that the army would be deployed to assist the police in enforcing SOPs to stem the spread of the disease. All the provinces as well as Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan have followed suit. Calling in the armed forces to assist local law enforcement is a very significant step taken in times of grave emergencies, and while it is unfortunate, the present situation arguably does qualify. All indicators are that matters may get worse before they get better; taking extra precautions now will ensure that the 'worst' will not push our health facilities beyond breaking point. As per a US-based institute's projected model, if the current trend continues deaths from Covid-19 in Pakistan will cross 28,500 by Aug 1 from 17,500 plus today. On Tuesday, 201 people died from the disease, the highest number of fatalities recorded since the start of the pandemic. Yesterday, 5,214 patients were in critical care, far more than were in that condition during the peak of June last year.

On the positive side, efforts are being made to ensure sufficient stores of oxygen for patients of Covid-19. Elective surgeries have been cancelled in public and private hospitals across Pakistan, and oxygen is to be diverted from non-essential industries to health facilities with coronavirus wards. But as they say prevention is better than cure, and getting vaccinated must become a priority for the citizenry. At the moment the availability of vaccines is not the issue; people's lackadaisical response is a bigger concern. According to SAPM on Health Dr Faisal Sultan, 3m doses have reached Pakistan since March 30 and contracts have been finalised for 30m more. The latest batch of 1m doses arrived from China on Sunday. There seems to be some indication that the situation in India is spurring more people here to get their jabs. On Tuesday, 117,852 vaccinations were carried out — the first time the figure has crossed 100,000 in a day.

But we have a long way to go. The 2.1m vaccinations administered so far are sufficient for less than 1pc population coverage. Pakistan should have been further ahead in this process, but the vaccine roll-out was inexplicably sluggish and the awareness campaign urging people to register for their jabs not robust enough to counter the prevailing vaccine scepticism. Nevertheless, with the pace of inoculation picking up and the army reinforcing the effort to ensure that SOPs are followed, one can hope that we will avoid the grim scenario our neighbours find themselves in.

Housing loan growth

THE State Bank and Pakistan Banks Association have claimed that the housing and construction loans portfolio of banks has grown by Rs54bn to Rs202bn from July to March compared to a stagnant position in the same period last year. “Such growth in housing and construction finance in such a period has never been witnessed in the country’s history,” the joint statement reads. It says that bank financing for housing and construction is likely to increase significantly as mortgage finance activity under the Mera Pakistan, Mera Ghar scheme picks up. SBP data on house-building loans paints a different picture though. It shows the stock of housing finance to citizens has risen by just Rs13.7bn to Rs93.5bn. If house-building advances to bank employees — the stock of which has grown by Rs25bn — is also considered, the total housing finance portfolio increases by Rs38.8bn to Rs228.3bn. Even construction loans to developers/builders for residential buildings have grown by merely Rs11bn.

Data discrepancies apart, there is little doubt that mortgage finance is slow to grow despite tax and interest rate incentives and housing subsidies announced a year back for developers, builders and potential homeowners. There is broad consensus that the scheme is mostly used by tax cheaters to whiten illegal money. Although the SBP requires banks to boost their housing and construction finance portfolios to at least 5pc of their private-sector advances by end 2021, they appear reluctant to comply. For starters, the banks are not comfortable with the existing foreclosure laws and want a mechanism whereby they can repossess the property without involving the courts in case of a default. Then most potential homeowners are not ‘bankable’ as they lack a credit/payment history. Moreover, there is a housing supply gap as developers aren’t prepared for risks unless they are certain of confirmed demand. The government has

recently increased the interest rate subsidy to give another push to affordable housing besides boosting financing limits for prospective homeowners, but the impact won't be known immediately. The statement mentions the measures being taken to redress loan-seekers' complaints and develop a model for income assessment and credit worthiness evaluation based on demonstrated expenses like rent payments, utility bills, etc. But these measures will help only so much. A better idea is to develop more effective foreclosure laws to give banks confidence besides pushing those who have used the amnesty to invest in affordable housing according to the size of the gains they have reaped.

Illegal confinement

THE report of another death in custody brings into plain view Pakistan's brutal police culture, where law enforcers themselves have been guilty of violating people's rights with impunity. Babar Khanzada was recently found dead inside the lock-up of the Tando Allahyar police station in Sindh. While the police said the suspect had committed suicide, the man's family suspected foul play. Khanzada had been accused of drug dealing. A police inquiry, while backing the view that the suspect committed suicide, has also observed that the local CIA had registered a false case against him, and affirmed the family's allegation that police officials were harassing them and pressuring them to pay a bribe in order to secure Khanzada's freedom. In a similar case in Karachi, a judge has directed the Sindh police chief to take action against the persons involved in a case of illegal confinement at the Counter-Terrorism Department police station. The victim's family say police demanded a bribe for his release.

The problem of illegal confinement, torture and death in prisons is one that is common in all parts of the country. Only the most egregious cases come to light, usually after the courts or civil society raise a hue and cry, forcing the higher police authorities to take action. Perhaps police authorities fail to realise that suspects are innocent until proven guilty, and even after conviction the fundamental human rights of a person cannot be violated. The police culture as a whole needs to change so that officers' conduct is in accordance with constitutional provisions and human rights principles. While better training — including modules on respecting fundamental rights and using non-violent methods to investigate cases — are important, it is essential that those found guilty of violating detainees' rights are given stern punishment. Many in the police

put their lives on the line for the safety of the public. However, the actions of some black sheep in uniform tar the efforts of the entire force.

Serious allegations

FORMER DG FIA Bashir Memon has opened a Pandora's box by saying that Prime Minister Imran Khan wanted him to initiate proceedings against Supreme Court Justice Qazi Faez Isa. In a wide-ranging interview on a private channel, Mr Memon alleged that Mr Khan and his team repeatedly asked him to take action against opposition leaders regardless of the lack of evidence against them. He also said the prime minister wanted him to register a treason case against PML-N leader Khawaja Asif for holding a foreign work permit, and demanded that he register a terrorism case against Maryam Nawaz for her press conference in which she 'terrorised' a judge of the accountability court.

Mr Memon said he refused these demands because in his opinion there was no evidence available to proceed against these people. He said he was punished by being removed from his position a few days before his retirement. On Thursday, in a meeting with journalists, Mr Khan denied all these allegations. Others who Mr Memon named, including Law Minister Farogh Naseem and accountability adviser Shehzad Akbar, have also rubbished these claims and sent legal notices to the former FIA chief.

The matter should not end here. As a senior officer, Mr Memon served in responsible positions while in service. He has come up with serious charges against those at the highest level. Even if there is a grain of truth to them, his allegations should concern everyone who adheres to the rule of law. It is unfortunate that in Pakistan almost all governments have wielded power at the expense of their opponents. With the sword of the executive authority in their hands, and no shortage of officials willing to do their bidding, governments have run roughshod over their opponents while shielding their own people from the glare of the law. It has been an unwritten rule among politicians that executive power shall be used with no pretence of equality and those who end up in the opposition should be prepared to pay the price of being on the wrong side of the political divide. This is why the PTI's narrative of change, and of smashing this very status quo, appealed to so many Pakistanis. It is therefore all the more shocking to hear the same allegations now being hurled at the PTI leadership.

Questionable PIA plan

THE plan to split the loss-making PIA into two companies to revive the national flag carrier has been tried before — and failed. The Nawaz Sharif government, which had devised the plan in 2015, was forced to back off because of strong protests from the employees and opposition political parties. Even if the PTI government does not face similar resistance from the airline's employees — and opposition from its political rivals — what guarantee is there that the company's fortunes will revive? With the government paying billions from taxpayers' money to scrap the bulk of the national airline's liabilities of Rs460bn, it is crucial that the details of the revival plan are shared with the public for debate and wider consensus. There are still people who believe that PIA can be turned around without having to split it.

PIA has declined mainly because of its flawed aviation policies that gave foreign airlines unfettered access to Pakistan's market without the country securing reciprocal concessions; poor management; years of little investment; bureaucratic interference; and last but not the least, uncooperative labour unions linked with political parties. But successive governments have chosen the easier course of holding overstaffing in the airline responsible for its downfall instead of focusing on all issues and resolving them. The main theme of the suggested plan does not seem any different. It seeks to divide PIA into a 'good' company with fewer financial liabilities and employees on its roll, and its 'bad' clone loaded with unwanted staff to be laid off in future and most liabilities to be paid off later with taxpayers' money. The ultimate goal remains the same: get rid of excess staff and unburden the company of its existing liabilities. How the 'good' PIA will be a better-managed entity than its parent company is anyone's guess. The proposed options for overhauling the national flag carrier to transform it into a financially viable entity include human resource restructuring through the voluntary separation scheme, engaging aviation industry experts, modernising the fleet, rationalising routes, product development and enhancing revenues. Which part of this plan is difficult to execute within the existing framework? Rather than experimenting anew, the better idea would be to bring in a professional management with a sound business plan and allow it full freedom to take the necessary decisions to turn the airline around. Before that, the government needs to engage its employees and other stakeholders to secure their buy-in for the future roadmap.

Tobacco tax

EASY access to and the low prices of cigarettes and other tobacco products is a key reason why their use is so widespread in the country. There are reportedly at least 30m tobacco consumers in Pakistan, across all ages and social backgrounds; they end up costing the national exchequer at least Rs615bn every year, or 1.6pc of GDP, in terms of the overall toll on the economy and health infrastructure. The habit of smoking alone comprises a massive 8.3pc of the country's overall health expenditure that is already critically stretched. It is for this very reason that the WHO rightly recommends imposing a tax that is at least 70pc of the retail price of the cigarette packet. However, the lax tax structure in Pakistan enables tobacco companies to sell cigarettes and other products at cheaper rates while still earning huge profits. It is ironic that the tobacco industry only contributes around Rs120bn to the national economy in terms of taxes but extracts a huge toll economically. However, instead of considering options for reducing the health and economic burden of tobacco use and taking steps to launch an aggressive campaign to discourage smoking and the use of other tobacco products, the government appears to be going in the opposite direction.

Recently, the federal health ministry dissolved the Tobacco Control Cell and terminated the services of its staff. The cell had been set up in 2007 to take steps for discouraging the use of tobacco products in the country. Even more surprising is the fact that the decision to disband the TCC was taken ahead of World Tobacco Day, observed every year in May. Whatever the reason for this strange decision, it will surely appear to observers that Pakistani policymakers are more sympathetic to the concerns of the tobacco giants than about the health of the population. The authorities may want to revise their decision in line with international guidelines regarding tobacco use and industries in the interest of public health.