

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of August 2020

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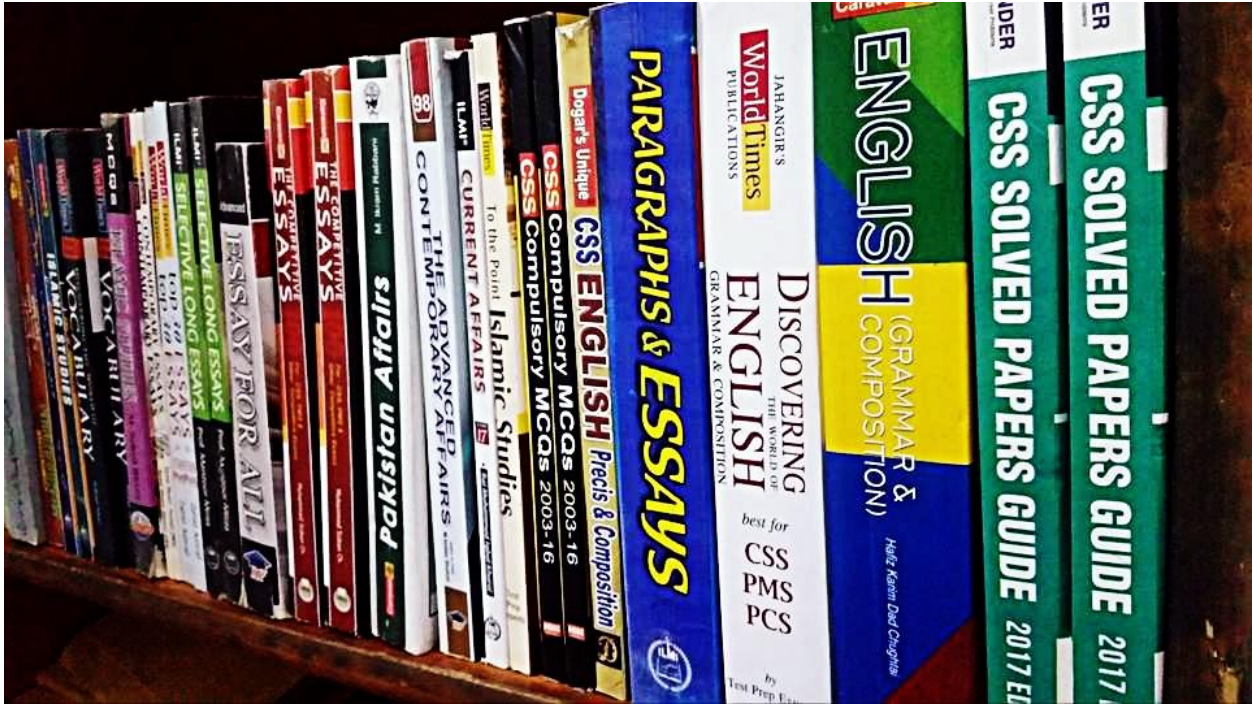
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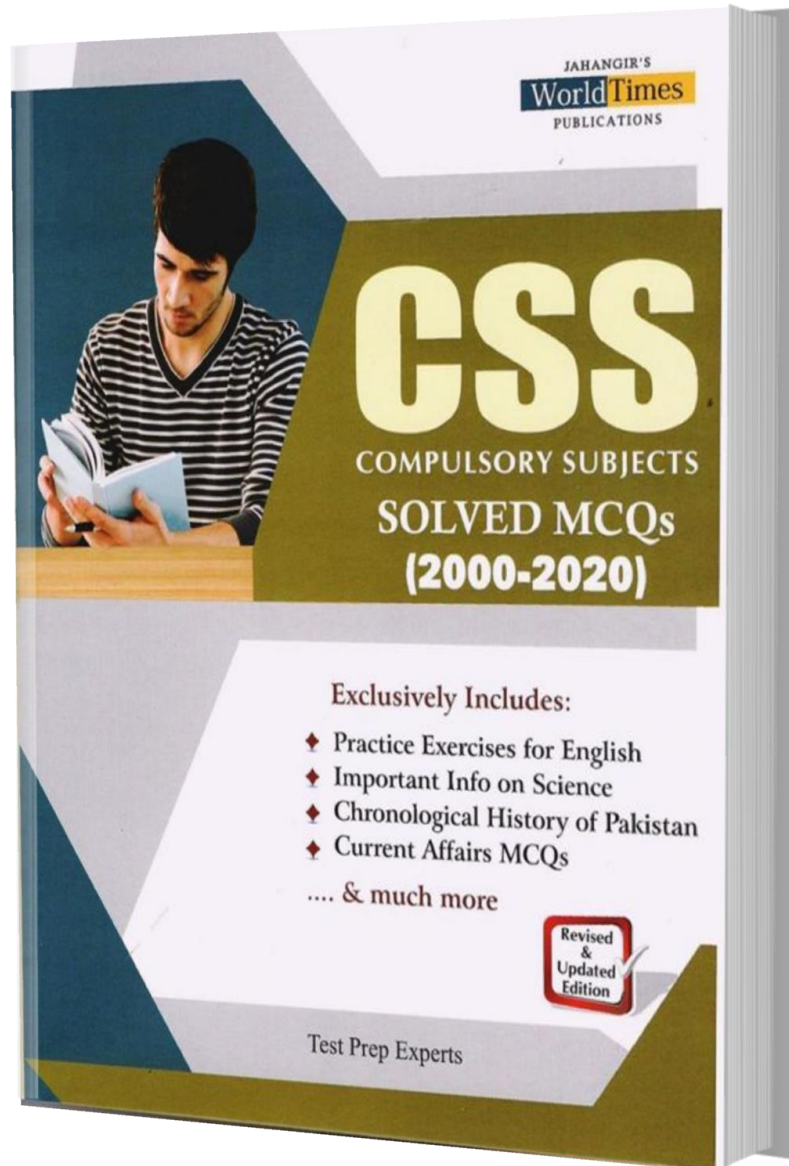
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Contents

Beyond FATF	10
Eid thoughts	11
Living in cages	12
Kashmir repression.....	13
NDMA in Karachi	14
More testing needed	15
Jalalabad attack.....	16
CAA bifurcation	17
Reviving tourism?.....	18
New map.....	19
PFUJ at 70	20
Needed reforms	21
Welcome turnaround	22
Economic recovery?	23
State of insecurity	24
OIC criticism	25
Sharing waters.....	26
Buzdar’s NAB moment.....	27
Taliban prisoners.....	28
Premature move?.....	29
Save the snow leopard	30
Ravi city project.....	31
Beirut shattered	32
Collateral damage	33
Loya Jirga’s advice	34
Regrets, post facto	36
Shock defeat	37
A predictable clash	37
Tree plantation.....	39
Billboard menace	40
US mediation.....	41
Missing LG systems.....	42

Protecting children	43
Aug 14 thoughts	44
A rare consensus	45
Russian vaccine	46
Israel-UAE deal	47
GIDC verdict	48
Peshawar BRT ready	49
Ties with Israel	50
New virus wave?	51
Perils of deforestation	52
Power agreement.....	53
Vicious attacks'	54
Peasants' rights	55
Running Karachi	56
Parliamentary affairs	57
Language matters.....	59
PTI's performance	59
Unfair assessment	61
Covid-19 vaccine trial	62
Pension burden	63
A tragic murder	64
Scientific excellence	65
Militancy concern.....	66
Different verdicts	67
The polio battle	68
New district in Karachi.....	69
Decrepit railway	70
Health insurance	71
The politics of deals.....	72
FM's China visit	73
Bad light stoppages	74
Iran sanctions threat	75
Maternal mortality	76

Safety during Muharram 77

Pepco’s revival 78

Banning groups 79

Smog season ahead 80

A rosy picture? 81

Dangerous words 82

Libya ceasefire..... 83

Afghan Taliban visit 84

Africa’s polio win 85

Monsoon catastrophe 86

Acid attack 87

Reopening tourism 88

IHC ruling 89

Orphan city 90

Funds for LGs..... 91

Christchurch conclusion..... 92

PTA’s arbitrary moves..... 93

Port operations 94

Polio storm..... 95

Beyond FATF

HAVING further tightened its anti-terror financing laws, Pakistan appears to be much better placed for its next assessment by the Financial Action Task Force. In February, the global watchdog on money laundering and terror financing had informed Pakistan that it had accomplished only 14 items of the 27-point action plan it had committed itself to in order to be taken off FATF's 'grey list' on which it was placed in June 2018. On Thursday, both houses of parliament passed two time-bound FATF bills, the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Bill 2020, and the United Nations (Security Council) Amendment Bill 2020. Coming off the grey list would considerably enhance Pakistan's standing in the world and defuse the threat that has hung like a sword over its economy were it unsuccessful in its endeavours.

However, the manner in which the laws were passed is a matter of concern. The bills and amendments to them suggested by a Senate panel were discussed in a behind-the-scenes meeting by the government, the PML-N and the PPP. The National Assembly then promptly rubber-stamped what was placed before it — its usual response to FATF-related bills. Such quiescence is jarring. The legislation pertains to national security, and the people's representatives would be expected to have robust opinions on it. It is also alarming, and highly unethical, for the government to have attempted to sneak in a draconian 'economic terrorism' bill under the umbrella of the FATF-related legislation. The proposed law would have allowed any citizen to be detained for up to 180 days, on instructions by committees manned by intelligence agency personnel. Fortunately, the opposition shot it down.

While FATF can be said to have forced Pakistan's hand and compelled it to crack down on the violent extremist groups that had long insinuated themselves into the warp and weft of society, this is the only viable path ahead for this country. The notion that such outfits can be 'managed' is flawed and myopic; ultimately, all of them devour their 'host' nation by corrupting its youth and destroying their future. Moreover, they do not operate in silos. At some level, even those that do not carry out attacks within Pakistan enable each other, if indirectly; all of them thus pose a security risk for the country. Since FATF first flagged the "strategic deficiencies" in Pakistan's financial system, the country has taken several measures to squeeze the space in which ultra right-wing groups can operate. In March last year, for instance, provincial administrations took control of hundreds

of madressahs, schools, mosques, etc run by the Jamaatud Dawa and Jaish-e-Mohammed. On July 17, 2019, the JuD chief, Hafiz Saeed — on whom the US has a \$10m bounty — was arrested on charges of terror financing. In February this year, he was sentenced for five years for the crime. There is a long road ahead, but Pakistan is on the right path.

Eid thoughts

THE spectre of the coronavirus continues to haunt Pakistan as the nation celebrates Eidul Azha, the feast of sacrifice. A question that deserves repetition is the same that confronted us in April as Ramazan neared: will the faithful observe the government's SOPs to help check the spread of the pandemic that has by now taken almost 6,000 lives in Pakistan?

Recall the consequences of the eleventh hour surrender by the government to the clerics, who at the time made little effort to ensure that the SOPs for prayer congregations were followed. This was in sharp contrast to the situation in many Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, where people followed the government's and ulema's plea to offer prayers at home.

In Pakistan, however, by ignoring these elementary precautions observed worldwide, the people and those they followed in matters of faith violated the SOPs and thus unconsciously added to a sudden post-Eid surge in Covid-19 cases and deaths.

We owe our front-line workers a huge debt of gratitude for getting the nation through this most trying time, for it came at a heavy cost. Now, even accounting for discrepancies in official data, there has been a welcome decline in infection and mortality rates. But, particularly in the absence of a scientific explanation for this reduction of cases, the nation can brook no complacency.

Besides preventing a resurgence of widespread infection, there is another health and safety challenge that Pakistan struggles with perennially while observing Eidul Azha.

Sidewalks serve as virtual abattoirs, and blood-spattered footpaths and lanes littered with animal waste are a recurring phenomenon. Annually issued public service messages to not dispose of carcasses in residential areas near airports

go unheeded, attracting carrion birds and increasing the risk of aviation accidents caused by bird strike.

Special care is required on the part of the people and city governments to ensure that the slaughter of sacrificial animals and disposal of waste is not only done properly and hygienically but also with a view to prevent large gatherings. How carelessness in the latter could be catastrophic is evident from an outbreak of Covid-19 among workers in a chicken slaughterhouse in Germany.

So far in 2020, Pakistanis have had to endure many hardships since the pandemic struck. This Eidul Azha, the spirit of sacrifice should move us to do whatever it takes to ensure the health and well-being of our fellow citizens.

Living in cages

ONCE again, Islamabad's Marghazar Zoo is in the news for all the wrong reasons. A few days ago, a nine-year-old lioness died upon her arrival to a sanctuary in Lahore. Now, there are reports that another lion who fell sick on the journey has died after battling for his life at a vet's clinic. Similarly, a female deer hog that was injured after being wounded by a male deer hog died during her relocation process. According to the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board, the heat and stress from the journey likely caused the death of the animals. To state the obvious, the authorities must take better care to ensure all precautions are taken before shifting the animals from a caged existence to open spaces. Otherwise, even in the process of trying to 'save' them, we will keep losing these majestic creatures to incompetency, neglect and ill-planning.

While Marghazar Zoo may have achieved notoriety over the years because of the number of animals that have died there — and particularly due to the international attention given to its sole elephant, Kaavan, who displayed signs of extreme distress in his small enclosure — the issue spans more than one zoo. Earlier, in May, a three-year-old giraffe from South Africa was found dead at the Peshawar Zoo. Other giraffes imported to Karachi and Lahore zoos have also met sudden and untimely deaths. And in 2018, an Asian lion trained for the circus died of tuberculosis at the Karachi Zoological Gardens. In 2014, a Bengal tiger died due to an unknown illness at the Karachi Zoo. In 2011, three lion cubs died at the same zoo, while a fourth 'disappeared', and was later said to have been eaten by his mother. There needs to be a larger discussion on cruelty to animals,

the use of animals for entertainment, killing animals for their body parts, the logic of having commercial zoos and circuses in this day and age, and our extractive and exploitative relationship with the natural environment that includes all sentient beings.

Kashmir repression

ONE year after India's revocation of Articles 370 and 35A, the situation in India-held Kashmir remains a powder keg of anger and repression. Ravaged by a brutal curfew that included complete shutting down of internet services, Kashmir today continues to suffocate under unprecedented military presence. The Hindu supremacist government of BJP led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi had boasted on Aug 5 last year that the annexation of Kashmir would bring peace and prosperity to the people of the region. A year later all such predictions have proved wrong. Thousands of Kashmiris have been imprisoned, tortured and made to disappear, and yet the population remains defiant.

There is hardly any doubt that Mr Modi's real objective in revoking IJK's special status as a semi-autonomous region under Article 370 was to bring about a demographic change there. Since last year, the government has aggressively promoted migration of Hindus to IJK through various incentives. In the long run, the BJP wants to convert the Muslim Kashmiri population into a minority on its own land. This policy has continued to unfold in the occupied territory since August last year under the shadow of Indian guns. Both the government and the pliant Indian media continue to claim that normalcy has returned to Kashmir but nothing could be farther from the truth. A large number of Kashmiri leaders — including the pro-Indian ones — remain incarcerated, freedom of movement is severely curtailed and independent media cannot get access to the region. Draconian measures like a communication blackout are routinely used to clamp down on resistance. Horrendous incidents of beatings and custodial killings of Kashmiris, including young boys, by the occupying force are commonplace. The heart-wrenching image of the infant sitting on the dead body of his grandfather slain by Indian soldiers is only one illustration of the gross human rights violations being perpetrated by the Indian occupying force.

The annexation of occupied Kashmir has also had a devastating impact on the livelihoods of people. The influx of outsiders into the region has put a strain on

employment opportunities for locals who have already suffered the loss of earnings under the blanket curfew that was imposed prior to the annexation last year. The much-touted investment conference that was to be held in Kashmir is yet to see the light of day. Covid-19 has added another adverse factor in the lives of people while providing security forces an excuse for further clamping down on movement. Occupied Kashmir is on the brink of a political, demographic and financial disaster. Pakistan should undertake every effort feasible to highlight the situation and mount pressure on India to reverse the disastrous decision of revoking the special status of Kashmir. India must not be allowed to get away with this travesty. This message should resonate loud and clear on Aug 5.

NDMA in Karachi

THE fact that the National Disaster Management Authority — a federal agency which, by virtue of its very definition, is designed to move in and launch operations when disasters strike — has been tasked by the prime minister to clean Karachi's storm drains shows that the metropolis's civic infrastructure has collapsed. It is no secret that decades of neglect and misrule by various parties have left Karachi in tatters, and the state this megacity is in is no less than a man-made disaster. NDMA personnel, along with the FWO, started work cleaning Gujjar nullah, one of the city's main storm drains, on Monday, taking out tonnes of sludge that had blocked the free flow of water and resulted in horrendous urban flooding in parts of the city during heavy rain spells at the end of last month. Another heavy spell has been forecast by the weatherman in the city later this week, which perhaps explains the federal government's urgency to get the drains cleaned.

While it may be a relief that some action has been taken at the official level to save Karachi from further rain-related misery, calling in federal agencies designed to be deployed in emergencies is only a stopgap measure. When the nation's largest city has a barely functioning local government, residents look at such ad hoc moves as the only solution. Indeed, all the players that use Karachi as a political battleground are equally responsible for this sorry state of affairs. The PPP-led Sindh government over more than a decade has, bit by bit, stripped away nearly all the powers of the local government, specifically keeping water, sewage and solid waste (mis)management under its wing. The disastrous results are in plain sight. Meanwhile, the MQM-led mayoralty also does little other than

complain about lack of powers and funds. While its complaint may be partially justified, the KMC does not seem to be particularly active in using whatever powers remain with it. On the other hand, the PTI's federal government — which has the most MNAs elected from Karachi — watches from the wings and after disaster strikes, moves in to the rescue with swashbuckling solutions. None of these are tenable approaches. Whether it is federal agencies launching clean-up operations, or the Sindh government unveiling grandiose foreign donor-funded civic projects, all these moves will fail unless there is an elected, empowered local government in place that can clean and maintain Karachi as part of its constitutional duty.

More testing needed

A CONSIDERABLE decrease in the number of active Covid-19 cases in the past couple of weeks has resulted in the easing of restrictions, the opening up of public spaces and reduced testing in several parts of the country. It is, however, too soon to let down our guard. As Prime Minister Imran Khan rightly pointed out, carelessness during Eidul Azha could cause a fresh spike in infections, putting further strain on our already overstretched healthcare resources. Though the daily number of deaths and infections have decreased considerably, the authorities would still have to keep an eye on the emerging trend over the next couple of weeks as those newly infected — their numbers could be considerable due to violation of SOPs and socialising over Eid — begin to show symptoms. This means that testing, which has gone down, has to be ramped up. Even at its peak, testing by the government was far below the target. But now that the rate of infection has fallen, government testing also seems to be on the decline. For example, the Punjab government has eased the lockdown earlier than anticipated while also reducing the number of tests by around 30pc of its daily capacity of 17,000. Less testing may leave us vulnerable if a second wave of infections begins in the country, so there is absolutely no room for complacency, and SOPs must be strictly enforced everywhere. There are also concerns that the approaching month of Muharram may see a spike in infections as people congregate to fulfil religious obligations.

To really push the country out of this pandemic, both the government and the people will have to keep taking adequate precautionary measures. The authorities should maintain a baseline level of testing despite the decline in cases

to be able to predict and prepare for a potential second wave of Covid-19 and to obtain more data. On its part, the public must follow the government-recommended SOPs to make sure that we conquer this pandemic once and for all.

Jalalabad attack

AFTER declaring a ‘caliphate’ in parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, the self-styled Islamic State group has unleashed a reign of terror in this region. The recent attack on the prison in Jalalabad shows how it has put its blood-soaked ideology into practice. Major gains had been made against the terrorist group in the Middle East towards the end of 2017, with both American- and Iranian-backed coalitions separately pounding the group’s positions in Syria and Iraq. While IS may not be completely eliminated from its erstwhile bastions in the Middle East, it is certainly a shadow of its former self, as the ‘caliphate’ at one time appeared poised to march on Baghdad, while it had established a ‘capital’ in the Syrian city of Raqqa.

There are lessons for the international community in the rise of IS and its hate-filled ideology, principally that such movements should not be taken lightly and that states need to stay ahead of such groups that use a mixture of religious symbols, charisma and acts of terrorism to brainwash potential recruits. Moreover, poorly governed spaces offer such groups a haven where they can train, rest and regroup. At the present time, ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan offer an ideal location for the Khorasan chapter of IS to establish itself and carry out terrorist attacks. The raid on the jail is proof that the deadly group is capable of wreaking plenty of havoc if left to its own devices. Around 30 people have been killed in the prison attack, which was ostensibly launched in reaction to the recent killing of a senior IS leader by Afghan forces near Jalalabad. Back in May, IS was involved in an attack targeting a police officer’s funeral — also in Nangarhar province — that killed over 30 people, while a chilling strike on a maternity hospital in a Shia-dominated area of Kabul, also in May, is widely believed to be the work of the group. As per a recent UN report, while IS in Afghanistan is in “territorial retreat”, the terrorist group “remains capable of carrying out high-profile attacks in various parts of the country”.

The fact is that unless there is durable peace between all Afghan factions — particularly the government and the Taliban — IS and those of its ilk will flourish in the chaos. Moreover, the ‘caliphate’ has many ideological fellow travellers in this region. These include thousands of TTP militants who are currently sheltering in Afghanistan, as well as other sectarian and extremist groups. If IS strengthens its foothold in Afghanistan, many of these militant groups will naturally gravitate towards it, creating a new security nightmare for the countries of South and Central Asia. The peace process between Kabul and the Taliban lumbers on, with a wobbly Eid truce largely holding. However, the longer the Afghan imbroglio drags on, the more strength IS will gain, threatening internal peace, as well as regional stability.

CAA bifurcation

A SIGNIFICANT course correction seems to be on the horizon for the country’s commercial aviation sector. Some days ago, a special cabinet committee met to finalise a government plan to bifurcate the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority into two separate regulatory and operational oversight entities — the Pakistan Civil Aviation Regulatory Authority and the other the Pakistan Airports Authority. The CAA board has decided to review the move and present its input after incorporating the members’ concerns, one of which involves security. The move to outsource airports has been in the pipeline for some time; in fact it was proposed under the last PML-N government, but nothing came of it. When the PTI came to power, it revived the plan.

The proposed bifurcation of the CAA is a step in the right direction. For some time now, lobbies within Pakistan’s aviation sector have been influential enough to resist reforms that would have enforced discipline and enhanced accountability, particularly where the national flag carrier is concerned. As a result, matters continued to slide. The PK-8303 air crash and the ‘dubious licences’ fiasco dealt a huge blow to the state’s credibility in managing aviation safety, and the need to change course acquired a new urgency. If the bifurcation goes ahead, it may be simpler for practical reasons to retain the regulatory body’s name as PCAA, separate the other functions and place them under PAA. Most importantly though, the regulatory entity must be staffed with professionals: they should be experts who can ably run its various units such as flight operations and airworthiness inspectorates. Qualified personnel should be given

the responsibility to implement the ICAO, FAA, EASA and aircraft manufacturers' guidelines, standards and directives. This is a critical regulatory function where the CAA has performed shabbily. And appointing officers on deputation from the military and civil bureaucracy to undertake these specific functions is not the answer. The government must not rush into legislative changes to bring about this new system before doing its due diligence. Civil aviation authorities in developed countries can be a useful guide for Pakistan to review and from where it can adopt best practices. The CAAs in these countries function purely as regulators whose responsibility is to ensure safety through oversight of operators. In these places, the management of airports — even air traffic control and radar — is outsourced; the regulatory body is the final authority on safety regulations compliance by all parties concerned.

Reviving tourism?

EVEN though the Gandhara Trail was earlier cancelled due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, with the number of cases steadily rising in the country in April, the KP government has now 'hinted' at kick-starting the much-anticipated tourism initiative after Eidul Azha. This venture would see tour operators take hundreds of tourists and pilgrims to Buddhist sites in Taxila, Swabi, Peshawar, Khyber, Mardan and Swat. It would undoubtedly be a wonderful way of highlighting Pakistan's rich and diverse heritage. One hopes to see the Gandhara Trail operate smoothly and successfully in the coming months, and to see tourism reopening, albeit in small and organised pockets. There is no doubt that the global tourism sector has been badly hit due to the pandemic, subsequent lockdowns and the closing of borders.

Pakistan may not be an international hub for tourism, but it has similarly suffered, especially at a time when efforts were underway to increase travel to and within the country. According to a World Bank policy brief on tourism in South Asia, Pakistan could suffer a loss of \$3.64bn due to the pandemic, jeopardising around 880,000 jobs in the tourism sector. Now, as the number of Covid-19 cases seems to be on the decline in Pakistan, small gatherings in open spaces, following all SOPs can perhaps be considered in the months ahead. However, even if there is some reason for optimism, the authorities must remain cautious, as the threat posed by the virus is far from over. For instance, it has also been reported that during the Eid holidays, thousands of tourists were barred from

entering Swat and Manshera, leading to a long queue of cars at the entry points. This shows that there is still some distance to go before the situation can return to normal. The days following Eid and Muharram will be crucial in gauging the threat from the virus, and whether or not it is safe to begin reopening the tourism sector.

New map

A DAY before the country observed Yaum-i-Istehsal to mark one year since the special status of India-held Kashmir was revoked by New Delhi, a new map of Pakistan was unveiled by the government which, the prime minister said, “supports our principled stance on Kashmir dispute”. There are various modifications in the new official map; for example the claim for Junagadh and Manavadar — now in India — has been highlighted, as has Pakistan’s position on Sir Creek. But perhaps the greatest change has been the inclusion of the entire Jammu and Kashmir region as part of Pakistan. This has expectedly raised India’s hackles, though the Foreign Office has shot down New Delhi’s remonstrations.

It appears that the cartographic changes are a psychological move designed to pay India back in the same coin. Last year, New Delhi had also released a political map which showed Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its territory. That questionable move was swiftly rejected by China and Nepal along with Pakistan, reflecting the serious border disputes India has with nearly all its neighbours. As for Pakistan’s new map, the prime minister termed it “the first step” towards resolution of the festering Kashmir imbroglio, while adding that the move was designed to reject India’s annexation of occupied Kashmir last year, and the bifurcation of the held region into union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh.

While it seems the changes on the map are designed to counter Indian propaganda, there are some questions the government should consider. Firstly, why was the map issued at this juncture? Secondly, how far will this move go in forwarding the Kashmir cause? Rhetoric apart, it needs to be examined what moves are being made on the ground to end India’s brutal siege of IJK, and resolve the Kashmir question as per the aspirations of the region’s people. Pakistan has always argued that only Kashmiris can decide their destiny, and no

changes can be imposed on them. Therefore, while the new map may be designed to express solidarity with Kashmiris, it needs to be reiterated that a final solution to the dispute can only be achieved after Kashmiris express their will in a democratic manner. Perhaps a detailed debate in parliament can help answer some of these questions, and clarify the situation for Pakistanis, Kashmiris and the world. However, regardless of these changes, the situation in IHK remains grim, with Kashmiris putting up with a year-long lockdown. Yet despite India's cruel tactics, the Kashmiris' spirit remains unbroken. The Indian military machine can apply all the pressure it wants, but the fact is that the held region's people have had enough of New Delhi's colonial rule, and want freedom and dignity. After living in limbo for over seven decades, the time is ripe for a just, peaceful solution to the Kashmir issue as per the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

PFUJ at 70

THE Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, which is celebrating its 70th anniversary this week, can look back on its history with both satisfaction and mortification. It has achieved a lot but has also lost much of its vigour due to factionalism within its ranks. The courageous decision to create an organisation dedicated to the ideals of a media free from bondage to the government — and Pakistan's other powerful players — was itself an achievement. It was a difficult task because of Pakistan's membership of Western military alliances; any mention of libertarian ideas was considered a communist plot. Yet the fact that the PFUJ not only survived but worked fearlessly under a unified, elected leadership is indeed a tribute to its founders' vision and courage. Their aim was simple and non-controversial — to have a trade union dedicated to ensuring the implementation of Pakistani journalists' professional rights and their economic well-being. One of its biggest achievements was getting an unwilling government to agree to the establishment of a body to categorise newspapers according to their financial strength and draw up pay scales for journalists. Set up in the early 1960s, the wage board has been giving its award every five years despite opposition from the owners' lobby.

An event that is an intrinsic part of the PFUJ's history was the nationwide strike in 1970, which was launched under the leadership of the late Minhaj Barna. While the strike was essentially for the grant of interim pay relief for all journalists, and was held after a 'yes' vote by PFUJ members, the general

election due later that year cast its ominous shadow on the protest. Right-wing political parties portrayed it as a leftist plot and tried to sabotage the strike by instigating the newspaper industry's non-journalist staff. One of the PFUJ's controversial decisions in the aftermath of the strike was to form a vertical trade union — the All Pakistan Newspaper Employees Confederation — that included both journalists and non-journalists. This decision led to a gradual dilution of the PFUJ's strength, with all bargaining power resting with APNEC. Now the PFUJ, for a variety of reasons, including personality-driven ambitions, stands divided in factions, several attempts at unity having failed. At a time when efforts are on to gag free expression, a united PFUJ is needed more than ever before. It is time common sense prevailed and all PFUJ factions realised it is only through journalists' unity that press freedom can be collectively defended.

Needed reforms

THE abolition of more than 71,000 federal jobs in BPS-1 to BPS-16 — or over 10pc of around 680,000 sanctioned posts — is a welcome step towards a leaner government. That the abolished posts had been vacant for at least one year means that most of these jobs were not needed at all and could have been created out of political considerations at the taxpayers' expense. The decision is part of the institutional reforms aimed at restructuring the federal government and will help check the latter's swelling pay and pension bill besides creating fiscal space for new recruitments to improve the quality and reach of essential public services including education and healthcare. The government has also begun evaluation of its employees in BPS-1 to BPS-19 to check poor performance — but here there are valid concerns of potential political manipulation on its part — besides reducing the number of federal departments, autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies, etc. On the face of it, the purpose is to make the government machinery responsive towards the needs of the citizens while controlling its running expenditure.

While the institutional reforms undertaken so far should be appreciated, these were the easier ones to execute. The harder ones are yet to be implemented. There are ample indications that the government is facing resistance to the 'change' it wants to bring in the quality of governance in many places from entrenched vested interests. For instance, the FBR hierarchy is reported to have already rejected its proposed reorganisation as suggested by the institutional

reforms body. Similarly, political compulsions are stopping the government from abolishing ministries and functions that have already been devolved to the provinces in spite of the significant burden on its budget. It must, however, be pointed out that a leaner government doesn't necessarily guarantee smarter governance as such. Reforms that aren't accompanied by greater use of technology and improvements in processes crucial to transforming the way public services are provided are always less likely to deliver effective governance.

Welcome turnaround

NEARLY five months after the first Covid-19 cases were detected in Pakistan, all indicators suggest that we have managed to prevent the all-out pandemic-induced healthcare calamity that was feared. With cases consistently falling, the positivity ratio in decline and critical care units designated for Covid-19 patients clearing out, it appears that the measures to curb the spread of the virus have been successful. Latest figures shared by the government are encouraging: 91pc of ventilators in the country are lying unutilised and at present, although there are more than 20,000 active cases, only 1,300 or so are being treated at hospitals.

This is indeed a welcome development — and one that the government, especially the National Command and Operation Centre, deserves credit for. In this, the work of NCOC head Asad Umar, advisers and provincial heads is notable, as they tenaciously worked together against a shared national threat despite some bitter differences. After some foot-dragging and fumbling, the authorities managed to get their act together and, under great pressure, formulated and implemented a plan to contain the virus. The criticism against public officials was both necessary and valid, and gave the federal and provincial authorities the impetus to confront a grim reality and act quickly. Pakistan began grappling with Covid-19 a month or so after it wreaked havoc in other countries, giving rise to fears of what the virus would do to a country of our size and vulnerability. After all, Pakistan has a massive population, a fragile healthcare system and a weak economy. Millions of people live in closely packed homes with large families. A significant proportion of the population has underlying conditions such as diabetes. Many communities also face acute water shortages, which meant that both social distancing and frequent handwashing were huge challenges. All these factors made Pakistan especially susceptible to the fast-spreading, high-fatality virus. Fortunately, that doomsday scenario was avoided.

Some good decisions were taken: the testing and quarantining of all international passengers, the track and trace system, closures and strict lockdowns in some cities and then smart lockdowns in hotspots. While the prime minister's initial messaging left a lot to be desired, in his more recent statements about the virus he reinforced its lethality. All these actions were important and have delivered results.

Now, as we follow other countries in moving forward, vigilance is of utmost importance. Mask wearing and social distancing must be enforced. Testing, which remained far lower than acceptable even at its peak, must be increased and made accessible. With Pakistan entering something of a Covid-19 twilight zone, it is important to acknowledge the very real and devastating consequences of the pandemic. Overburdened healthcare workers, fatalities in the medical community and the death of over 6,000 people are more than just sobering statistics of the gloom and doom unleashed by the pandemic.

Economic recovery?

IT is hard to weigh the signs of 'early economic recovery' seen in July against the significant loss of business confidence as computed by a business organisation on the basis of a half-yearly survey, and come up with an answer to the question: are we moving in the right direction? The Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry informs us that the overall business sentiment has worsened because of the "huge scare caused by the coronavirus pandemic". Even before the virus had reached Pakistan, business confidence was already declining owing to a combination of factors including massive currency devaluation, high interest rates, steep inflation and the IMF-mandated economic stabilisation policies. The Covid-19 lockdowns and uncertainty had only compounded economic woes with businesses seeing sales slump and profits shrink as domestic and foreign demand crashed, throwing tens of thousands of people out of work.

The forecasts of a slower and painful recovery notwithstanding, July — the first month of the fiscal year — saw a substantial surge in domestic demand, especially in the construction and rural sectors. Cement sales have gone up sharply underscoring a recovery in the construction business. Tractors, motorcycles and farm inputs too are in greater demand indicating improved rural

income levels. Carmakers expect their sales to recover over the next six to 12 months. Imports are rising. FBR tax collection has far surpassed the target for the month. Even exports have increased, though only marginally. The stock market is bouncing back. And so on. Based on this data, many are predicting a much quicker recovery going forward than what was previously forecast. But the question remains: is this recovery sustainable given the fact that much of it is caused by fiscal and monetary incentives given to mitigate the virus impact on businesses and reboot construction activity? With infections apparently declining much faster than expected, the government wants to completely reopen the economy in the next few weeks. That will have a salutary impact on the economic activity and create consumption-led growth in demand over the short term. Yet long-term economic recovery requires sustained growth momentum. That largely depends on how the government deals with the structural impediments to new investments in the manufacturing sector to boost exports, and if it still has the appetite to implement policy reforms, including, but not limited to, reorganisation of its tax system and energy sector, to improve the poor business environment.

State of insecurity

ON Wednesday, a Jamaat-i-Islami rally in Karachi, staged in solidarity with the people of India-held Kashmir — which recently marked one year since India revoked its special status — came under attack by assailants who threw hand grenades into the crowd. Nearly 40 people were injured — one person later died — in the attack, which has been claimed by the banned separatist Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army. While there have been fewer militant attacks when compared to our not-so-distant blood-soaked past, such incidents reopen old wounds and bring to life all-too-familiar fears of disharmony in the country. Karachi and other parts of the country have been the sites of ethnic and sectarian violence over the years, and one can only hope to never return to those days of perpetual turmoil and insecurity, when terrorist attacks and bomb blasts became the norm, or when bodies would be left in gunny bags in the dead of the night.

On a less frequent scale (perhaps on account of beefed-up security in some places) a string of sporadic attacks on high-profile targets have been perpetuated in recent times, many of which have targeted security personnel themselves. In

June, Baloch separatists attacked the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi, leaving four security personnel dead, and injuring several bystanders. And last year, the banned TTP attacked a DIG police compound in Loralai, killing a number of policemen. In May 2019, a bomb blast carried out by a TTP splinter group outside the Data Darbar shrine in Lahore killed 13 people, including several security personnel. Following this, another attack by Baloch separatists on the Gwadar Pearl Continental Hotel in Quetta left five people dead. Then, in July 2019, militants on motorbike attacked a security checkpoint in Dera Ismail Khan, before a suicide blast was carried out inside a hospital, killing several people, including six security personnel, and injuring many. With Muharram around the corner, the government must ensure greater security for the crowds that are expected to gather in observance of religious traditions.

OIC criticism

IT is rare for high officials in Pakistan to publicly criticise ‘friendly’ and ‘brotherly’ countries over foreign policy differences. However, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi’s recent blunt criticism of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation — in fact a thinly veiled critique of Saudi Arabia — has raised eyebrows.

Speaking to a TV channel recently, Mr Qureshi expressed his frustration with the multinational bloc of Muslim states, which is headquartered in and largely controlled by Saudi Arabia. He “respectfully” told the OIC to convene a Council of Foreign Ministers over the burning Kashmir issue, or else Pakistan would “call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on ... Kashmir”. The foreign minister added that Pakistan pulled out of December’s Kuala Lumpur Summit on a Saudi “request” but now it expected Riyadh to “show leadership on this issue”.

The fact that this reflects state policy and not just the foreign minister’s personal feelings was reiterated by the Foreign Office on Thursday. The FO spokesperson said Pakistan expected “forward movement” from the OIC on the Kashmir issue, though she also highlighted the “fraternal relations” between Islamabad and Riyadh.

It is a fact that no past government in this country has ever criticised the Saudis in this manner. The long-standing economic, political and military ties between

the two countries go back decades, even though the relationship has been tilted in Riyadh's favour. However, it appears that the Saudis' lack of interest in resolving the Kashmir dispute has touched a raw nerve in ruling circles, and the government expects our Arab brothers to do more to help end the suffering of the India-held region.

This paper has long pointed out that the OIC has become an antiquated talk shop, which does little of substance to address the key issues of the Muslim world, though the state has always contested this view. Now it appears the ruling elite has come round to the fact that playing second fiddle to Riyadh won't do; Pakistan must explain its priorities — “our own sensitivities” as Mr Qureshi quaintly put it— in a clear and frank fashion.

While this country has always spoken up for Palestine and Kashmir, many of our Arab friends have scrambled to improve or establish ties with India and Israel.

Perhaps the prime minister needs to explain in detail the road map that Pakistan now intends to follow. As it is, there are several geostrategic blocs in the Muslim world; the Gulf Arabs and Egypt are aligned with the US; Qatar and Turkey are charting their own course, while Iran, Syria and the Hezbollah in Lebanon form yet another axis.

Does Pakistan intend to ally with any of these formations, or does it aim to create a new bloc with like-minded states? Foreign policy goals must be clear and must ensure that Pakistan takes a moral stand, while not annoying our friends and benefactors.

Sharing waters

THE decision of the Council of Common Interests to constitute a committee to “look into the issue of fair distribution of water among the provinces” recognises the inherent weaknesses and inadequacies of the Water Apportionment Accord signed back in 1991. Often hailed as a landmark agreement on the distribution of the waters of the Indus River System among the provinces, the accord lacks a clear objective. If the purpose, as is widely accepted, was to resolve the long-standing interprovincial disputes — particularly between Punjab and Sindh — on the sharing of waters, it has utterly failed to do its job. Some would go so far as to blame the accord for having accentuated tensions between the two provinces in

its nearly three decades of operation. The ambiguities in the provisions of the agreement, according to numerous research studies carried out by experts, also let the stakeholders interpret the document variously to suit their own interests and perspectives.

The agreement assumes that 117.35MAF of water will be available in the system for allocation to the provinces according to their share agreed under the accord. But in reality the actual system supplies have always been much lower than the assumed volumes. More problematic is the ambiguity or lack of a clearly defined mechanism for sharing the shortages — the differential between the assumed and actual volumes in the system. The provision that the record of the actual average system uses for the period between 1977 and 1982 would form the basis for sharing water shortages and surpluses has intensified the dispute between Punjab and Sindh, instead of ending it. Punjab remains adamant on interprovincial water distribution on the basis of historical uses. However, Sindh insists on the allocation of its share on the basis of the supplies assumed in the accord. Sadly, Irsa, which oversees the operation of the water accord, is not seen as an impartial arbitrator and, for various reasons, has failed to resolve the disputes over the formula for sharing the shortages. The formation of the CCI committee has spawned hopes that the centre and the provinces are now ready to discuss the contentious provisions of the accord and tackle them sooner than later. In spite of its shortcomings and ambiguities, the water accord is considered an important milestone towards the resolution of interprovincial tensions over the water-sharing mechanism. The CCI committee needs to only bring clarity to the vague stipulations of the agreement.

Buzdar's NAB moment

ELEMENTS opposed to Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar may be deriving satisfaction from what they have just been served up. NAB announced it would go hunting inside the government camp after Eidul Azha, and Mr Buzdar has now been summoned for allegedly giving an under-construction hotel in Lahore licence to sell liquor. Apparently, not only has the chief minister violated the law laid down in 2009, but a 'relative' of his has also allegedly received a bribe of Rs50m for extending favour to the hotel's 'influential' owner. The expectation of a swift conclusion would be far greater here in comparison to many of the old

cases that NAB is investigating and where evidence gathering is that much more difficult because of the time that has elapsed.

The probe against Mr Buzdar could well be the high-profile stimulus which will enable NAB to take a close look at the working of PTI members for any suspicious signs. The PML-Q leaders, who are key PTI allies, are already facing NAB's wrath and at least three other PTI members have been marked for inquiry by the bureau following the Buzdar affair. These facts could well be used to counter an opposition that has also fallen foul of the accountability body and has been alleging political victimisation. But this drive to appear unbiased on NAB's part may have come a little too late in the day. The valid observations of rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, speak of the serious erosion of NAB's credibility. Politically, the timing of the case is important. One question that has popped up time and again during all the debate over Sardar Buzdar's fate has been about his boss Prime Minister Imran Khan not having a good enough reason to accept that his Punjab experiment is not working. Legal aspects apart, this NAB case against the chief minister will require some fundamental fixing within the PTI in Punjab. A rearrangement at the top could well be unavoidable this time.

Taliban prisoners

THE peace process in Afghanistan has reached a critical stage. Stakes are high for everyone concerned, none more so than the people of Afghanistan who have endured four decades of conflict. As the Loya Jirga meets in Kabul to decide on key questions including the release of the remaining Taliban prisoners, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has had a telephonic conversation with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and discussed Pakistan's role in promoting peace in Afghanistan. In a tweet, Mr Pompeo termed the call "productive" and said, "I look forward to advancing our shared goals and increasing partnership." Mr Qureshi said Pakistan would be a partner for peace with the United States.

Peace hinges on the talks that are expected to take place between the government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban. These talks in turn are dependent on Kabul's decision to release about 400 Taliban prisoners. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stressed that peace talks could begin in days if prisoners were freed. The Afghan government has already released about 5,000 Taliban

prisoners but there is some unease about freeing the last batch which includes many who have apparently been involved in high-profile attacks. Mr Pompeo has, however, urged Kabul to release the prisoners because this could lead to direct talks and an end to the war. The Trump administration wants a peace deal quickly so it can withdraw enough troops from Afghanistan before the US presidential elections in November allowing President Donald Trump to tout this as a major foreign policy achievement. Timing is therefore key. Pakistan has played a major role in facilitating discussions and remains heavily invested in a positive outcome of these talks. Kabul should swallow the bitter pill and proceed with the release of the remaining Taliban prisoners without delay. With Washington egging both sides on and Islamabad providing full support in every sense, there is no reason why the peace talks should not commence without much delay. Once they do, the next stage of negotiations regarding power sharing will bring up many sensitive issues. It will not be an easy task given the fact that the government controls Kabul while the Taliban hold sway over a major portion of the country.

Everyone wants an end to violence. This war-weariness may help stakeholders display greater flexibility in their positions. However, long-drawn negotiations could complicate matters. The presence of the militant Islamic State group is already a looming threat and the longer this uncertain situation prevails, the greater the chances of spoiler events taking place. The US is also pressed for time which means it can lean on the Afghan government to do away with unnecessary delays. It is an opportune moment for Afghanistan to make peace with itself and agree on a framework for future power-sharing and governance. All stakeholders must stay the course and make it happen.

Premature move?

EMBOLDENED by the falling positivity rate and lower coronavirus-related hospital admissions, the National Command and Operation Centre has allowed the reopening of businesses in the country. Timelines have been announced according to which several sectors, ranging from restaurants and transport to educational institutions, beauty parlours and gyms, will reopen. Even poorly ventilated venues, such as cinemas and marriage halls can start functioning again with government-mandated SOPs in place.

However, the Pakistan Medical Association expressed pertinent concerns over the decision and has said the government should have at least waited for the consequences of Eidul Azha to become clear. The PMA's general secretary said it would take 10 days to know if the virus spread rapidly during the festival, and also pointed to potentially super-spreading high-turnout events such as the upcoming Muharram gatherings and Independence Day celebrations. These are valid concerns and the authorities must consider them very seriously. The haste in arriving at this decision is baffling, considering that even the prime minister had warned of a post-Eid spike in coronavirus cases if caution were not exercised. However, the government has made its announcement on the reopening of every commercial sector less than a week after Eid celebrations ended. In its elation over Pakistan's Covid-19 success, the government rushed to give this good news to businesses across the board that all is well and life can go back to normal. This attitude is dangerous and defies logic. The post-Eid period should have been a test for the government to gauge the situation. In Punjab, cases had dropped to an average of below 100 during the last week, but have again increased to around 300. With no restrictions and the public geared to go back to normal, the threat of community transmission is high. The government must reconsider its stance. It has the unenviable task of striking a balance between a controlled reopening of the economy and safeguarding public health, and these decisions must be taken with vigilance and caution as priorities. No doubt, Pakistan is fortunate in having lowered the Covid-19 curve and has prevented an all-out catastrophe such as we have seen in countries where hospitals and morgues were inundated. Yet, the authorities must not allow their optimism to ignore the hard facts: Covid-19 is a fast-spreading, deadly virus that has crippled many sophisticated healthcare systems and devastated communities. All decision-making must be done with cautious optimism — not wishful thinking.

Save the snow leopard

FOR centuries, the elusive snow leopards ruled some of the highest peaks in the world, living and hunting at altitudes ranging between 900 to 6,000 metres. However, in recent years, their numbers in the wild have dwindled, and they face danger on multiple fronts. From climate change and the loss of their natural habitat, to falling prey to poachers looking to sell their fur and body parts in the black market, the snow leopard is presently placed under the 'vulnerable' category in the IUCN Red List. According to the wildlife monitoring network,

Traffic, at least 220 to 450 snow leopards are killed each year by farmers and hunters across Asia. In Pakistan, these majestic creatures can be spotted — every once in a while — in the Himalayas, Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, but they have shared a mutually threatening relationship with local populations. In May 2019, for instance, a snow leopard reportedly mauled an eight-year-old child to death in the Galiyat. Then, in January 2020, a snow leopard attacked and injured a man in Swat, before it was shot dead by residents. There have also been several instances of snow leopards feeding on livestock, further angering residents, who kill these large cats to protect themselves and their sources of sustenance.

Beyond survival, though, the animal's skin and bones hold great monetary value in the illegal trade of animals, and poaching continues under the radar. Most recently, five people were arrested by the Gilgit-Baltistan Wildlife Department after they put up photos of themselves smiling next to a slain leopard on social media. The men confessed to the killing, and mentioned that the female snow leopard lived with her two cubs, whose lives were spared. Despite the remarkable conservation efforts carried out by local NGOs to save the species, and engage local populations in the process, there are only an estimated 300 to 400 snow leopards left in Pakistan. Wildlife authorities must do much more to protect them.

Ravi city project

THE launch of the multibillion-dollar, Dubai-style city project on the Ravi riverfront does not sit well with the PTI government's election manifesto which had promised to reshape the country's development strategy by moving away from the mega brick-and-mortar schemes and invest in citizens for inclusive, sustainable growth. In spite of appeals from experts to cancel the River Ravi Urban Development Project owing to environmental and other reasons, Prime Minister Imran Khan chose to move ahead with the planned launch on Friday. With the government struggling hard to kick-start growth and push the contracting economy out of recession, Mr Khan is apparently pinning his hopes on the revival of stalled construction activities for an early turnaround. Hence, his government has in recent months announced significant fiscal and monetary incentives for builders and developers to boost housing, especially for the low-income segment, in the country. The intervention is showing some positive

results with the increase in domestic consumption of cement and other building materials in July.

The expected private investment of Rs5tr on the development of the new city, which would be spread over an area of 100,000 acres and straddle the river north of Lahore, may boost construction-related industries and create thousands of jobs over the next several years. But can the project, which is being undertaken without an independent, comprehensive socioeconomic impact assessment, help Lahore tackle its numerous civic problems: shortage of safe drinking water for a majority of its population, inadequate drainage, overpopulation, degradation of the living environment, shortage of schools for children etc? The answer is in the negative. Instead, it is feared that the scheme will further weaken the delicate ecological balance as floodplains are being used to build high-rises, and the poor and their livelihoods will be upstaged to pave the way for luxury living of the wealthy and powerful.

In the past, the prime minister has repeatedly spoken of the urban sprawl and its impact on the environment and citizens. However, the construction of a new city is not the answer to these problems. Nor can it be a substitute for better urban planning. Instead of new cities/urban settlements, we need to invest heavily in improving the deteriorating infrastructure — water supply, drainage, education, health, environment etc — in the existing ones. Also, the government needs to bring these public services to smaller towns in order to control unchecked growth in labour migration from less developed areas to major urban centres for jobs and better services. Just ‘development’ or short-term economic prosperity through mega brick-and-mortar projects may not work out without assessing their benefits for the majority of the people. Instead, we need ‘responsible development’ that ensures the prudent use of public money and requires the government to invest heavily in human development and improvement in the quality and extension of essential public services to all for sustainable economic growth.

Beirut shattered

IT is difficult to describe in words the devastating blast that rocked the Lebanese capital Beirut last week. Watching the footage of the massive explosion at a port warehouse was disturbing enough; Beirutis must have gone through hell as the

blast ripped through their city. While the explosion was caused by over 2,700 kg of ammonium nitrate stored at the warehouse, the jury is still out on what exactly triggered the blast. Various theories are doing the rounds — an Israeli attack targeting Hezbollah’s weapons, sabotage etc — though no clear explanation has emerged. The Lebanese president has mentioned two possible causes: “negligence or foreign interference through a missile or bomb”. While only a thorough investigation can uncover the truth, thousands of Lebanese took to the streets of Beirut on Saturday to denounce their government; the country had already been simmering, caught in the middle of an economic meltdown with people railing against the Lebanese political class. The blast at the port was, as it were, the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Lebanon has had a chequered history following independence from France in 1943. Under the so-called National Pact, power has been divided amongst the country’s religions and sects. Rather than creating harmony, this has aided instability, with the country going through a vicious civil war from 1975 till 1990. Moreover, Lebanon is located in a rough neighbourhood, with regional conflicts spilling over into its territory. Israel has violated Lebanese sovereignty with particular impunity, invading the country in 1982. Tel Aviv’s occupation of south Lebanon lasted till 2000, when the Zionist state was driven out by Hezbollah. In more recent events, the effects of the Syrian civil war have also had a destabilising effect, adding over a million Syrian refugees to the number of Palestinians Lebanon hosts after they were driven out of their homeland by Israel. To add to these troubles, Lebanon’s political class has been unable to steer the country out of troubled waters due to a mix of corruption and incompetence. In the immediate future, the international community needs to stand with Lebanon and help it get back on its feet. Many countries, including Pakistan, have stepped forward by sending relief supplies. In the long run, the Lebanese must themselves reform their political system to create a democratic state where fundamental rights are assured for all, instead of waiting for foreign saviours to pull them out of the quagmire.

Collateral damage

THE Covid-19 outbreak has thus far claimed 700,000 lives across the world but the true magnitude of its impact will be felt in the months to come. As governments — including Pakistan’s — divert their financial and health resources

towards fighting the pandemic, severe collateral damage from these endeavours is being incurred by the primary healthcare infrastructure that plays a key role in the diagnosis and treatment of prevalent infectious diseases. According to a story in The New York Times, around 80pc of the programmes intended for the treatment of tuberculosis, malaria and HIV have reported disruptions worldwide, giving rise to the possibility of increased deaths and development of drug resistance in patients. Tuberculosis claims around 1.5m lives every year across the world (more than any other infectious disease) but the three-month lockdown and gradual return to normalcy over subsequent months will result in 1.4m additional deaths worldwide. Similarly, experts have also predicted that the death toll from malaria could double while 500,000 additional deaths would be caused by HIV/AIDS due to interruptions in treatment cycles.

The burden of the resurgence of these diseases will fall disproportionately on poorer and developing countries such as Pakistan. In fact, the issue is doubly concerning because of our already shambolic health infrastructure. Even before the pandemic, Pakistan was reporting the fifth highest number of tuberculosis cases worldwide and the fourth highest of multidrug-resistant TB. The Global AIDS Update 2020 has already warned of a sharp increase in HIV/AIDS cases in Pakistan, and the current monsoon spell will be followed by the yearly surge in malaria and dengue. Similarly, in 2019 polio cases in Pakistan were up by more than 1000pc; this year, immunisation campaigns have remained suspended for the past three months. The worst of Covid-19 may be over but our existing health problems appear to have increased manifold. With the lockdown lifted, the authorities must immediately focus on tackling existing infectious diseases to contain the damage the pandemic has caused in their eradication efforts.

Loya Jirga's advice

A MAJOR stumbling block standing in the way of peace between the government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban may have been removed with the recommendation of the Afghan Loya Jirga to free 400 "hardcore" Taliban prisoners. There were great expectations after the Americans and the Taliban had signed what was described as a landmark peace agreement in Doha in February. A stipulation in that agreement was that Kabul would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, while the Afghan militants would set free 1,000 government troops. While the Afghan government had set free the vast majority of detainees,

around 400 Taliban men remained in captivity, with some of them accused of perpetrating heinous crimes. However, this hurdle too seems to have been cleared as the Jirga — in which around 3,200 Afghan influentials and politicians took part — has spoken in favour of extending an olive branch to the Taliban by freeing their remaining fighters. “We are on the verge of peace talks,” declared Dr Abdullah Abdullah, head of the Loya Jirga and amongst the most powerful politicians in Afghanistan. The Foreign Office also welcomed the move, saying it hoped that with the decision “intra-Afghan negotiations will commence at the earliest”.

The decision to free the Taliban fighters was certainly not easy, as the Jirga faced criticism from some of its own members as well as others for releasing the insurgents, some of whom have been involved in egregious acts of violence targeting civilians along with soldiers. However, it is clear that the grand Afghan gathering has taken the risk of freeing these fighters to prevent Afghanistan’s collapse into total anarchy with the departure of foreign troops, especially with even more bloodthirsty groups such as the self-styled Islamic State waiting in the wings. As reported, Afghan security forces arrested 11 IS terrorists who were aiming to attack the Loya Jirga on Sunday. The fanatical group clearly wants to see chaos in Afghanistan so that it can use the vacuum to expand its tentacles across the region. This is all the more reason for all Afghan factions — including the Taliban — to end the violence and work for a political settlement in their country.

The ball is now in the Afghan Taliban’s court. Now that one of their key demands has been met and endorsed by a grand gathering of Afghans, let them put forth their own confidence-building measures. There is combat fatigue across Afghanistan. The Western forces that invaded the country in 2001, led by the US, have lost their appetite where their nation-building plan for Afghanistan was concerned and now want to bring their troops home. Most of all, the Afghan people are tired of almost non-stop instability dating back to the 1970s. The Taliban and the Afghan government must now take full advantage of the situation to start a meaningful dialogue, as this window of opportunity may not last long.

Regrets, post facto

THE Punjab Assembly has courted needless controversy, and given that matters of religion are involved, defusing it will be far from straightforward. On July 22, the provincial lawmakers unanimously passed the Tahaffuz-i-Bunyad-i-Islam Bill, which now requires only the governor's assent to become law. Since then, several legislators from both the treasury and opposition benches have had a change of heart — or undergone a reality check — and are now declaring their opposition to the same. They say they voted for the bill without reading it and fear that if passed into law it will fuel sectarian divides in Punjab. Some treasury members see the entire episode as a 'conspiracy' against the PTI government, while a PTI legislator sought forgiveness for having supported the bill. Predictably, the religious lobby is pushing back with its usual straw man arguments. On Sunday, clerics from several Sunni schools of thought met in Lahore to decide on their future line of action. At the press conference that followed, they condemned what they described as "vicious" and "intolerable" attempts "in the name of reservations on this bill" to make the sanctity of holy personages controversial.

The MPAs belatedly expressing their opposition to the bill have behaved in a shockingly irresponsible manner. That they should have voted in favour of a piece of legislation without even reading it is bad enough, but to have done so in a matter that involves the tinderbox of religious sensitivities is truly appalling. A simple reading of the bill's clauses throws up numerous red flags. If enacted, the law will be a gift to the ultra right and could reverse the gains made in delegitimising violent extremism in society. Consider the fact that Maulana Ahmed Ludhianvi, the leader of the banned sectarian organisation Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, was among the clerics who met on Sunday. Moreover, the bill is designed to shred the concept of freedom of expression by setting up a repressive system of censorship. According to this, one individual, the director general of public relations, will have sweeping powers to stop the publication of any book containing, in his opinion, 'objectionable' material. There is another aspect of the legislators' supine vote in favour of the bill that deserves to be highlighted. Over the years, as the influence of ultra conservative elements in society has grown — even if their numbers in parliament remain limited — acquiescence on religious issues seems the 'safer', hence default, option.

Shock defeat

BY losing the first Test against England at Old Trafford, a match they had in the bag for the most part of four days, Pakistan has lost an advantage in the three-match series. With a number of new players — whom England had no prior exposure to — in the line-up, including the fast bowling duo of Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah, besides opener Abid Ali and wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan, Pakistan had been hoping to take the hosts by surprise. They were buoyed, too, by Babar Azam's stellar presence since he is a much more accomplished player now compared to 2018 when his series in England was cut short by a nasty arm injury. And last but not the least, the welcome return to form of Yasir Shah came as a huge boost to Pakistan's bowling as the leggie lapped up eight wickets in the match. But none of these factors, including a healthy first innings lead of 107, could see Azhar Ali's men cross the winning line. They have no one but themselves to blame for psychologically not measuring up to the moment of truth.

For a team that arrived in England well over a month ago and had ample time to acclimatise, Pakistan had no excuse for its defeat at Old Trafford and showed they are still vulnerable to pressure despite having abundantly talented players in their ranks. In the final analysis, the abject batting collapse in the second innings coupled with Azhar's prosaic captaincy on the fourth day rankle. It is always an uphill task for a visiting team to bounce back after defeat in the opening match, and players must ask themselves why they lost. With stalwarts such as Misbah-ul-Haq, Younis Khan, Waqar Younis and Mushtaq Ahmed in the coaching staff, surely the players have no dearth of good advice available to them. They now have to go in with a resolve to win and play aggressive cricket from the outset to emerge victorious and cheer up their dismayed fans.

A predictable clash

THE clash between Punjab police and PML-N supporters in front of the National Accountability Bureau's office in Lahore was avoidable. NAB had summoned Maryam Nawaz Sharif to appear before investigators in order to answer questions regarding 'illegal' acquisition of land in Raiwind.

The PML-N continues to emphasise that NAB cases against the party leadership are all politically motivated. NAB for its part has not stepped back from aggressively pursuing cases against many key leaders of the party. The situation on Monday was, therefore, ripe for a confrontation.

Ms Nawaz's decision to reach the bureau's offices accompanied by a large number of supporters was aimed at flexing political muscles at a time when the opposition was beginning to be seen as relatively passive. However, the behaviour of the police — which had been deployed in significant numbers armed with riot gear — further inflamed the tense situation.

Video clips shared widely on social media show scenes of violence including the police hurling stones at the vehicles of PML-N leaders. The windscreen of Ms Nawaz's jeep was also damaged in the fracas. The police tear-gassing and baton charge forced NAB authorities to postpone the summons but the PML-N leader insisted in front of the media that she would stay till she had recorded her statement. Saner minds prevailed in the end and she left the venue.

The police, however, arrested a number of PML-N supporters, many of whom had received injuries during the clash. The unfortunate incident once again highlighted that NAB's summoning of high-profile politicians is usually grounded more in optics than in substance.

Over the last few years, dozens of politicians — an overwhelming majority belonging to the opposition — have been called for investigations, and also detained on flimsy grounds, without NAB producing any convincing case against them. Such tactics may have ensured headlines for NAB but have not led to convictions and sentences. By now, NAB authorities should have realised that the success of their performance lies less in sending high visibility summons and arrests and more in building up a case that can stand up in a court of law.

The PML-N should also keep in mind that legal procedures should not be undercut for political gains. Although Ms Nawaz's defiant actions on Tuesday may have charged up the party's base, they have also contributed to politicising a valid procedural requirement from the investigating agency. For Ms Nawaz, however, the situation presented an opportunity to break her long silence and reappear in public to reinforce her defiant message.

Her press conference later confirmed that her narrative has not softened. This may be a message meant both for her adversaries as well as her supporters. If

the PML-N is planning to dial up pressure by getting Maryam Nawaz to return to a public role then politics is about to heat up. The fate of the opposition's multiparty conference, however, remains unclear.

Tree plantation

SOON after coming to power in 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated his ambitious tree plantation drive with the goal of planting 10bn trees across the country during his five-year tenure. This Sunday, as part of the much-hyped "largest tree plantation drive", which aimed to plant 3.5m saplings in a single day, the prime minister planted a sapling in Banigala in view of the cameras. Despite some questions being raised about the details of the campaign and its actual impact, the tree plantation drives have received global attention and praise, with other leaders taking up similar campaigns, and the World Economic Forum launching the One Trillion Trees Initiative. Then, on July 31, the prime minister tweeted photographs of Balloki Nature Reserve, near Sheikhpura, which turned green in a year because of the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami project. Besides their obvious benefits for the environment, the tree plantation drives have generated employment for thousands of people, and such 'green stimulus' packages are all the more important during a pandemic and an economic crisis. However, on the same day, a video of residents destroying saplings went viral, marring an otherwise happy occasion, in Bara, Khyber district. The men and children could be seen yanking the plants from their roots with their bare hands, or carrying shovels, while others raised black flags in protest. They chanted slogans against the 'forceful' intrusion into their property, which they decried as an unlawful move. When volunteers tried to intervene, they were quickly overpowered. Government representatives admitted that they had planted saplings on disputed private land, and said they had started negotiations with the residents. While many will be quick to condemn the men in the video, the authorities must take care to not alienate local populations, particularly in regions where the state may still be viewed with suspicion, and to be mindful of private land rights.

There is no doubt regarding the importance of such mass tree plantation campaigns, especially since Pakistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and as heavy rainfall and floods once again wreak havoc across the country, killing people and destroying property. Pakistan is also believed to have one of the highest deforestation rates in the world, and even as

we plant new trees, there must be efforts to protect old and indigenous trees from being chopped down.

Billboard menace

THE recent spell of monsoon rain in Karachi has brought the menace of billboards to the Supreme Court's attention once again. A few days ago, a large hoarding near the city's Metropole Hotel broke loose from its moorings during a thunderstorm and injured two motorcyclists passing on the road below. Taking note of the incident, the apex court on Monday ordered that all billboards and hoardings on public buildings and properties across the metropolis be taken down. Further, the three-judge bench asked the city commissioner to inspect billboards on private buildings and have them removed where they pose a threat to the public.

Urban centres in Pakistan have long been blighted by the mushroom growth of outdoor advertising. In 2014, Karachi alone had an estimated 3,000 plus hoardings and billboards. The sale of outdoor advertising is an extremely lucrative business for government officials, cantonment authorities, and outdoor advertising agencies. Even green belts and footpaths in some places are commercialised, a blatantly illegal step given they are amenities and hence cannot be put to commercial use. In 2016, when over a dozen 20-year-old trees were chopped down to make space for billboards on one of the city's main thoroughfares, the Supreme Court took the view that the law did not allow for outdoor advertising on public property and ordered the KMC, DHA and cantonments boards to remove it. Moreover, it ruled that billboards and hoardings clutter the city's landscape, increase visual pollution and pose risks to pedestrian and drivers alike. The land authorities took their time to comply with the court's directives. In several places, the infrastructure to mount billboards was left intact in anticipation of the storm blowing over and resumption of business as usual. Sure enough, hoardings and signboards have begun slowly popping up all over the city; sometimes, even when mounted on private property, they defeat the considerations of public safety. Only when corrupt elements in the district municipal corporations and cantonment boards are punished will this game of whack-a-mole end.

US mediation

THE thought of getting the US or other world powers involved in improving the sticky Pakistan-India relationship is attractive, especially when bilateral efforts keep reaching a dead end. However, experience and history teach us that America or other 'influential' states are not very interested in jumping into the boiling cauldron of South Asian regional politics, and peace will only come to this region when states themselves are ready for it. In this context, the foreign secretary on Tuesday brought up the Pakistan-India relationship with the American undersecretary of state for political affairs. As quoted in the media, the foreign secretary told the American diplomat that there was a need "to take steps to prevent escalation of tensions and to facilitate peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute".

While the government's sentiment to get Washington involved in order to resolve South Asia's bitterest dispute must be appreciated, some ground realities ought to be considered. Ever since independence, America has hardly rushed forward to end the hostility between Pakistan and India. In fact, when it comes to this relationship, the US has only intervened during times of extreme crisis, for example during the Kargil fiasco. Moreover, even if the US did come round to committing itself to playing peacemaker in South Asia, the fact is with an election looming in November, no US candidate will have the appetite to commit to this role. Facilitating diplomatic engagement between Pakistan and India is no easy task, and both major parties in the US will be too preoccupied with their own domestic issues to spend time and energy on South Asian peace. Also, during an election year, and with a highly active Indian-American lobby, candidates will be looking to grab as many votes as possible, especially from racial/ethnic blocs, instead of launching risky diplomatic initiatives in a highly unstable region. If at all, Pakistan should pursue American mediation after the results of the presidential elections are announced.

Secondly, mediation will only work when the other 'aggrieved party' — India in this case — is willing to listen to a facilitator. The BJP-led right-wing government that rules New Delhi has hardly gushed over the thought of making peace with Pakistan, and has in fact rebuffed this country's efforts. Moreover, India's standard, rigid line is that Kashmir is a 'bilateral' dispute, and that third-party mediation in this regard is unwelcome. If this is the attitude, how can facilitation

succeed? By all means world powers should use their influence with New Delhi to push it towards peace. But Pakistan should be realistic and not depend on others to improve its ties with India. The best bet would be to prevent bilateral relations from deteriorating further until a more approachable government takes power in India, without compromising on Pakistan's principled stand on Kashmir.

Missing LG systems

THE reluctance to work at strengthening the foundations is reflected in the inability to deal with crises. There was much discussion on how the presence of a local government could have helped Pakistan establish a firmer grip on the situation arising out of Covid-19 when the rains added impetus to the debate. Just as the basic local tier of political parties, vital to any system claiming to be democratic, is fiercely discouraged, a local government worth the title is an elusive goal. Punjab wrapped up its local bodies last summer. Sindh has a debilitated system that was hardly expected to do anything after a 2013 amendment sapped all energy from the local bodies. KP has recently managed to put off its LG polls till next August, while the system in Balochistan was dissolved in 2018. And then we ask why our cities are drowning, and why there is no one there to forewarn the villagers of Kacho that their territory is about to be flooded. They are the victims of a system abandoned midway, plagued by infighting among elite power holders. Double standards is the accusation thrown at the harbingers of provincial autonomy — basically the PPP — by the central government. Sindh's ruling party is accused of denying powers to the grassroots tier — the local government — even as it demands provincial powers from the centre. In the next frame, the centre, ie the PTI government, is found crippling and then doing away with an entire LG system in Punjab — because local governments in the province were hugely dominated by the PML-N.

The problem lies in concentrating too many powers in too few hands, even if it means snubbing one's own party in the process. When the PML-N controlled local governments across Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif acted as king instead of giving LG officials their due. There is only one way this can be remedied, and it is neither by sympathising with nor making fun of a Karachi mayor determined to end his term this month. There can be no compromise on grassroots empowerment. This means there is no going back on decentralisation. Hence, the push for further zonings must continue, until power is truly devolved and

shared at the grassroots. Hopefully, the water levels have risen to a sufficient level for people to react sharply and demand a local government as a fundamental right. Perhaps the floods have left the soil fertile for this.

Protecting children

IN a meeting held on Tuesday, the Senate Special Committee on Child Protection spoke of the need to strengthen the investigation process in child abuse cases, including addressing loopholes in existing child protection laws and building the capacity of medical and investigative officers to handle such cases. As the Kasur child sexual abuse ring that was exposed in 2015 demonstrates, in many instances these are not isolated crimes committed by individual assailants, but violations ranging from physical violence to cybercrimes, committed on a massive scale and in collusion with multiple perpetrators. Tragically, despite the shocking revelations of 2015, or the horrific rape-murder of little Zainab in 2018 — an event that became the catalyst for the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act — predators continue to victimise children with a sense of impunity. Earlier this year, the child protection advocacy group Sahil revealed it had documented at least 2,846 cases of child abuse reported in newspapers in Pakistan in 2019. The grim reality is that, given the stigma attached to the issue as well as the fact that assailants are often either a family member or closely acquainted with the victim's family, this figure is a drop in the ocean compared to the actual rate of child sexual abuse in Pakistan. Similarly, for every case of a child domestic worker being physically assaulted that receives the attention of the authorities and public, there are scores more incidents that go undetected.

Our laws must be strengthened, but it is equally important that attempts to improve legislation not take place in a vacuum. Laws alone are not enough to guarantee the safety and well-being of Pakistani children — particularly those who are at higher risk of neglect, abuse or exploitation. Greater scrutiny and vigilance are needed of schools, madressahs and the places in which children work. More investment is needed in specialised child protective services. The debate must continue in order to shine a light on more than just the tip of the iceberg.

Aug 14 thoughts

ON this Independence Day, the nation has every reason to derive a degree of satisfaction from the knowledge that its fight against the coronavirus has been a successful one so far.

What contributed greatly to the effort was that the government and opposition, though bitter foes, understood at some point that developing a national narrative to counter the infection was crucial to the fight against the virus which has devastated societies and economies the world over. This example just goes to show that a spirit of cooperation and unity can be invoked and greatly help both sides overcome a variety of challenges that have only grown since the time of independence.

Indeed, there have been many opportunities to jointly work towards ending the economic downturn, illiteracy, poverty, human rights abuses and galloping population numbers that face us today. But many such chances have been frittered away in blame games and thoughtless moves to undermine each other.

Among the several major challenges before us is the dangerous drift towards pernicious and retrogressive ideas that run counter to Mohammad Ali Jinnah's ideals and that could in the long run pose a threat to Pakistan's fragile democratic structure. The evolution of these anachronistic ideas is a subject unto itself, and even though they took birth in the aftermath of the Quaid-i-Azam's death, they gained momentum after 9/11 and the subsequent rise of international terrorism.

Few countries have suffered greater ravages than Pakistan as home-grown terrorists received 'ideological' — and in some cases material — support from right-wing elements with their own agendas. More regrettably, governments and state institutions often patronised extremist groups, parties and militants when the authorities mistakenly believed they could be of use in advancing our foreign policy objectives.

While the Pakistani Taliban rejoiced at the murder of our soldiers and civilians, successive governments followed a policy of appeasement and let extremist groups operate with impunity. This misplaced leniency showed itself in tragedy both at home and abroad.

Moreover, madressah products and the vast amount of literature they produced promoted regressive theocratic ideals and encouraged those out to destroy 'Western' values — an omnibus term for repudiating all that the founder of Pakistan stood for. Jinnah had made it clear, and not just in the Aug 11 speech, that Pakistan would not be a theocracy and that all its citizens would enjoy equal rights.

Often, in state policies, there appears to be more emphasis on form and less on substance. Notice the morally hollowed Tahaffuz-i-Bunyad-i-Islam bill passed by the Punjab Assembly. Such hurriedly passed laws serve to reinforce bigotry and parochialism.

Also of concern is the threat to media freedom from both state and non-state actors. What is missing is an official and nationwide rejection, loud and clear, of all ideas that run counter to the values Jinnah worked for all his life.

A rare consensus

ON Wednesday, the National Assembly passed five more FATF-related bills as a result of an understanding between the government and the opposition. There was some acrimony on the floor of the house when Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said the opposition had wanted to link its support for the bills earlier with NAB law amendments, but Speaker Asad Qaisar managed to deftly control the situation. He had also played a key behind-the-scenes role in bringing the two sides to agree on the bills before they were brought to the floor. This is a good development and it strengthens Pakistan's position when its case for removal from the grey list comes up at the next meeting of the Financial Action Task Force.

The pressing urgency to get this legislation done is dictated by FATF requirements but it is in the interest of Pakistan to make such laws that curtail terror financing and money laundering. In fact, ideally Pakistan should not have waited for FATF pressure to get such legislation done, and instead, enacted these laws on its own. The country has suffered tremendously due to terrorism and it is in our interest to take all steps necessary to ensure terror outfits do not take root in the country again. It goes to our credit that we have been able to degrade and defeat the scourge of terrorism but we must continue to reform our systems and plug weaknesses wherever identified so that the infrastructure of

terrorism is dismantled fully. However, as things stand now, it is hoped that the FATF will appreciate the steps that Pakistan has taken in light of the requirements laid down by it. The passage of bills by consensus at a time of acute polarisation is a good sign. While it may suggest that the government and the opposition may have been nudged and pushed into forging a consensus on these bills, it is heartening that both sides have managed to overcome their mutual distrust and partisanship to push the legislation through. Hopefully, this would help build a better working relationship in parliament. One point of concern is the attempt by the government to add some draconian measures to these bills that were not a requirement of the FATF. The opposition had pointed these out and requisite amendments were made. All concerned should ensure such measures that curtail the rights of citizens should not sneak their way into future legislation.

Russian vaccine

AS countries race to produce the first coronavirus vaccine, Russia's claims that it has approved such a vaccine have been met with serious scepticism — and for good reason. Russia announced this week that the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine has been given the green signal for extensive use and that the country was forging ahead with mass manufacturing and immunisation plans to kick off vaccination as early as October. President Vladimir Putin said the locally developed vaccine was given regulatory approval after less than two months of testing on humans, but that it had purportedly passed all the required checks. To silence naysayers, he added that his daughter had already been administered a dose. Worryingly, the head of the country's sovereign wealth fund said there are international agreements to produce 500m doses and requests for 1bn doses from 20 countries. The announcement has sparked legitimate fears among experts, who said the Russian vaccine has bypassed 'phase 3' — a crucial trial stage which mass-tests an under-research vaccine on thousands of people to observe its efficacy. Professors and medical experts from reputable institutions have expressed concern over several aspects of this vaccine, and called into question the process through which it was approved. Some fear it is difficult to know how safe or effective it will be given that the work that went into its development was not transparent. The WHO has said vaccines must go through all stages of testing before being rolled out. Multiple experts have said vaccines that have not been properly tested can be detrimental in many ways, negatively

impacting health or creating a false sense of security. What is more dangerous is that they can undermine trust in all vaccines.

While the world is understandably desperate for immunisation against Covid-19 due to the colossal toll the infection has taken on all aspects of life, jumping the gun when it comes to health matters can have dangerous consequences. Countries must proceed ethically and with caution before considering the mainstreaming of such a vaccine.

Israel-UAE deal

THE peace deal between Israel and the UAE announced on Thursday seemingly came out of the blue. But for those aware of happenings in the Middle East, the relationship between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi had been blossoming behind the scenes for many years.

Thursday's announcement by US President Donald Trump was only a formal acknowledgement of these clandestine efforts. Especially over the past year or so, efforts towards normalisation had gained pace, with cultural exchanges between the Zionist state and the Gulf sheikhdom, as well as efforts on social and mainstream media, to help pave the way for the establishment of ties.

Also read: Timeline — Israel, UAE deal follows years of failed peace initiatives

While the three main protagonists of this move — the US, Israel and the UAE — have hailed it with fulsome adjectives such as “bold” and “historic”, the Palestinians have been less sanguine. A spokesman for President Mahmoud Abbas termed the deal “disgraceful” while Hamas has described it as a “stab in the back”.

Israel, built on the ruins of Palestine, and the UAE, on the tip of the Gulf, share no geographical borders, so why the rush towards normalisation? Clearly, both these states — leading members of the American axis — share common geostrategic goals, and the welfare of the Palestinians certainly does not seem to be one of them.

Both Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi are at daggers drawn with Tehran, and this alliance will certainly send alarm bells ringing in the latter capital. Moreover, the sheikhs that rule the UAE share a visceral dislike of political Islam — including its leading

proponents in the Arab world, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas (the latter being an offshoot of the former).

Israel, on the other hand, has faced off with Hamas in Gaza numerous times, butchering the hapless civilian population in the process. Also, Hamas is a key ally of Iran, which means Israel and the UAE can now openly compare notes in order to confront their respective bêtes noires. And of course, Mr Trump will use the deal to show his evangelical voter base that he has added another ally for Israel in the Arab world.

Peace in the Middle East is a goal everyone cherishes. But peace must be based on justice and fair play; otherwise such 'peace deals' are fig leaves for capitulation. The Israel-UAE deal is being hailed for stopping the illegal annexation of the West Bank by Tel Aviv. This is a blatant untruth as soon after the deal was announced, Benjamin Netanyahu told the media "there is no change to my plan to extend sovereignty" over the occupied territories.

Can such peace deals ensure the human and national rights of the Palestinians in the form of a viable two-state solution? The Palestinian answer to this can perhaps best be summed up in a tweet by veteran PLO leader Dr Hanan Ashrawi: "May you never be sold out by your 'friends'."

GIDC verdict

THE majority Supreme Court judgement in the Gas Infrastructure Development Cess case allowing the government to recover the unpaid fee of Rs405bn from industrial consumers of natural gas seeks to resolve an issue that has been dragging on for a decade. The levy was imposed in 2011 to raise funds for gas infrastructure development. The total GIDC accrued so far is Rs700bn, of which about Rs295bn has been collected. Rs405bn will be recovered now. As most firms moved the courts against the fee shortly after its implementation, many companies passed on its full or partial impact to their customers, eg motorists in the case of CNG pump owners. Others couldn't do so. Some companies partially or fully deposited the cess with the government, or withheld payment pending a court decision. Last year, the government amended the GIDC law, requiring industrial consumers to pay half their outstanding dues while waiving the remainder through an ordinance, in order to settle the dispute. But the ordinance was withdrawn quickly amid a public outcry and a petition was filed in the apex

court. The judgement allows the government to recover the outstanding amount from defaulters in two years but links future collections to the complete utilisation of the cess on projects for which the levy was imposed. Thus, the court order bars the government from using GIDC collection for any purpose other than gas infrastructure construction while also blocking its future income stream under it. This is consistent with the view that it was unfair of the government to ask the industry to pay a cess on a certain resource while failing to divert the money to other projects.

Most industrial consumers will see their earnings drop and liquidity adversely affected owing to large cash outflows as the government recovers outstanding dues. The 488-point drop in the benchmark KSE-100 index shortly after the verdict testifies to market fears. The government had also not given any timeline for developing projects for which the levy was imposed. And, as noted by the dissenting judge, it didn't provide for a mechanism of "obligations and consequences that might arise if the service was delayed or was not delivered at all". Good business always demands that a resort to the court for arbitration be avoided. This didn't happen. But after the course suggested by the court has been fully complied with, this GIDC example can perhaps be the basis for more profound, time-barred remedies in future.

Peshawar BRT ready

THE long-awaited, though controversial, Peshawar BRT project is finally complete and has been opened for the public. Constructed at an inflated cost of about Rs67bn, the ambitious rapid transit system has been billed as the answer to all commuting issues in the KP capital. Around 30 stations have been built along the main BRT corridor that is some 27km long. Besides, the large fleet of buses that would ply along the main corridor and adjoining routes, the low-cost transport project also includes a bicycle-sharing system and an express service that would stop only at seven of the 30 stations. During its construction, the project was marred by design flaws that increased the total cost, incessant delays, corruption allegations and reports of irregularities in construction leading to an FIA investigation (later stopped on judicial orders). But the PTI-led provincial and federal governments remained adamant and went to great lengths to complete the project.

This could be seen as an encouraging sign had not the circumstances under which the project was announced exposed a spirit of political hubris, especially given the fact that such mega development schemes have not been part of the PTI's vision for the country; the party leadership itself has vehemently questioned the utility of similar projects in Lahore and Multan. However, all said and done, the true test of the BRT project begins now. It remains to be seen whether the project, for which 25,000 trees had to be cut down, will resolve Peshawar's mass transit issues or exacerbate them, and whether or not it will add to environmental pollution — which the PTI leadership claims will be reduced. Similarly, the maintenance of the stations, the large fleet of hybrid diesel buses and the BRT track might also prove to be a burden on the provincial government's budget. One really hopes that this project proves to be effective and reduces commuters' woes. Otherwise, it would have been a waste of all the time, effort and money that went into it.

Ties with Israel

IN the aftermath of the shock announcement of the establishment of relations between Israel and the UAE, there is feverish speculation about which Arab/Muslim country will be next to forge ties with the Zionist state.

Beyond the realm of conjecture, none other than the president of the US has confirmed that this process has begun, and it is a matter of when, not if. The US "believes that more Arab and Muslim countries will follow" the UAE's lead, reads a White House statement.

Bahrain is believed to be next in line, while Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's son-in-law and his Middle East emissary, told American media that "it is an inevitability that Saudi Arabia and Israel will have fully normalised relations. ..." However, Riyadh itself has, till now, kept silent on Abu Dhabi's latest move.

For Pakistan, the million-dollar question remains how to react to these fast-changing geopolitical realities, especially if most of our Arab brothers decide to cast their lot with Israel. The Foreign Office's reaction to the UAE-Israel deal has been described as ambiguous. This is to be expected, for the Emiratis are close partners of this country, politically and economically.

The FO has said the deal will have “far-reaching” implications, though it reiterated that this country’s approach will be guided by how the “Palestinians’ rights and aspirations are upheld”. Observers were quick to point out that the language of the statement was vague, as Pakistan had always demanded Israel withdraw to the pre-1967 borders, and that Al Quds be the Palestinian capital.

Beyond generalities, the time is not far when Pakistan will have to take a firm stand on this issue, and if more Gulf Arabs decide to recognise Israel, there will be tremendous pressure on this country from our ‘friends’ in Washington and the Gulf to follow suit.

During the Musharraf era, the idea of establishing ties with Israel was floated, with the then foreign minister meeting his Israeli counterpart in 2005. However, those plans were quickly shelved when the general sensed the public mood here was not ready to accept ties with Tel Aviv.

Now, again there is debate about how to proceed. There should be a thorough discussion on the national level on the pros and cons of establishing ties with Israel. However, a few ground realities must be kept in mind. Any such move should be conditioned on Israel ending its brutal treatment of the Palestinians, and moving back to the pre-1967 borders. Without such assurances, Pakistan would join others in rewarding Israel for its blatant disregard for human rights.

Moreover, if Israel is embraced by the Muslim world without a just resolution to the Palestine question, the Kashmir cause will also suffer, as India will be further emboldened to crush the Kashmiris. Pakistan must make a decision in a democratic manner, guided by its long-standing support for the fundamental rights of the Palestinians.

New virus wave?

JUST days after the government announced that all sectors of the economy would reopen in light of the decrease in Covid-19 cases in the country, fears of a second wave are beginning to take root. According to a report in this newspaper, the Punjab government has cautioned the divisional commissioners and regional police officers about the possibility of the resurgence of Covid-19 cases across the province as a result of “rampant violations of the standard operating procedures” in markets after lockdown restrictions were lifted. In a letter issued

by the province's primary and secondary health department, it was noted that the public health threat from Covid-19 still existed and that the infection may spread if adequate precautions are not strictly enforced. The letter was written following serious complaints about the non-compliance with the Punjab government's SOPs in "markets, shopping malls and plazas". While hinting at the possibility of a second wave of the virus, the department secretary who penned the letter stressed the importance of following guidelines which, to the credit of the provincial government, had slowed down the spread of the potentially fatal virus.

The sheer scale and recklessness with which Independence Day was celebrated in the major cities reinforces these apprehensions. Thousands gathered at public monuments to take photos and commemorate the day, with little regard for distancing or wearing face coverings. Such a scenario is a classic example of a super-spreading event during which a highly transmissible virus like Covid-19 can be passed on to hundreds of people. After Eid and Aug 14 — two events which the government warned could result in higher cases if SOPs were not enforced — the third major occasion, Muharram, when thousands will gather to observe religious traditions, is just around the corner. The federal and provincial governments must do more than plead with people to observe SOPs. The message should be unambiguous and firm: follow SOPs or face fresh restrictions. After months of restrictions and a successfully lowered Covid-19 curve, it would be a senseless tragedy for Pakistan to sleepwalk its way into a second wave. Just a few weeks earlier, the Pakistan Medical Association expressed fears that Covid-19 cases could worsen with a sharp rise in cases in mid-August. Authorities should act fast to ramp up testing, identify hotspots and do everything possible to curb the number of cases — especially given the high likelihood of spread at major public gatherings.

Perils of deforestation

A RECENT statement by the World Wildlife Fund has revealed that Pakistan has the second highest deforestation rate in Asia. It flagged the recent flash floods in Balochistan, Sindh, and other areas as a warning sign for which immediate action was needed to mitigate the effects of climate change. Pakistan, with the world's fifth largest population, is among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to the impact of changing weather patterns. The fact that only 5.7pc of its total land is under forest cover, in contrast to the recommended 25pc, has added to the

risk. The highest deforestation rate in Asia is that of Afghanistan, a country ravaged by war for the past many decades.

Tackling climate change is a top priority of the present government. It is reflected in the PTI's flagship 10 Billion Tree Tsunami project. Such efforts, though ambitious, are a step in the right direction and need to be encouraged. But a holistic approach to the problem is needed. The first step should be to restore the ban on forest cutting. The ban had been in place since 1993 but the PTI government in KP ended it in 2014. Similarly, an embargo must be placed on the allotment of forest land to private developers. Though the prime minister has directed the Punjab government to resist the timber mafia, the effort will take a lot more than a slap on the wrist, for the actual criminal masterminds often have connections in high places. Just as important is making the public aware of a challenge that, if not tackled forcefully, could lead to repercussions for generations to come. The authorities can work with local populations to conserve forest cover in their respective areas. Controlling deforestation is key to dealing with other environmental problems too. These include the loss of ecosystems and natural watercourses. Awareness and cooperation will go a long way in lessening the devastating impacts of climate change in the country.

Power agreement

IN what is being described as a breakthrough, the government got what it had long been seeking: wind power plants/IPP set up under the 1994 and 2002 power policies have agreed on revising their power purchase agreements to give up part of their overall returns. Shortly after the MoUs between the government and the power producers had been signed, the prime minister took to Twitter to “congratulate the nation because we are fixing the damaging structure we inherited in our power sector”. The agreement will help bring down generation costs and result in ample savings for the government by slowing the pace of circular debt and decelerating consumer tariffs in future. Yet the real benefits will accrue only when the larger IPPs (established or being set up under or outside the CPEC initiative), public-sector generation companies and hydropower and nuclear power projects — all of which claim more than 75pc of the total capacity payments — also agree to revise their contracts along the same lines. That part may prove more difficult because of the involvement of Chinese firms — many of which were given upfront tariffs — and the absence of any ‘stick’ to scare the

power producers, at least for now. In return for their ‘voluntary’ concessions, those who have signed will no longer be hounded by anti-corruption outfits, and ongoing investigations against them will be dropped. Nor will they be slandered in the media. A fair exchange, no?

There’s little doubt that IPPs are getting unjustifiably high returns on their investment and a reduction in profits would help rationalise consumer electricity prices. But the country’s collapsing power sector cannot be fixed just by forcing power producers to part with some of their profits. Nor will the circular debt get liquidated. The real elephant in the room are the massive distribution and transmission losses and power theft, and the inability of distribution companies to recover billed amounts in full. These losses account for more than a third of the total units of electricity produced. Nothing has been done in the last two years to ensure complete recovery of the bills from powerful defaulters or to plug theft or distribution losses. Instead, the honest consumer has been saddled with these costs.

The benefits the government or consumers stand to accrue in the wake of the revised contracts notwithstanding, the way the entire process has been conducted reflects poorly on future investment in the power sector. With NAB going after some prominent businessmen on the mere allegation of wrongdoing, the forcible modification of commercial agreements will increase the risk premium that investors demand before investing in Pakistan. Any future agreement would require greater, guaranteed return as the government will be seen as an unreliable partner. We have seen it before. That was the major factor behind Nepra’s failure to implement the tariff-approval procedure based on competitive bidding.

Vicious attacks’

AN opinionated woman in Pakistan might as well have a target painted on her back. When she has a public profile and is active on social media, the abuse and threats of physical and sexual violence directed at her multiply exponentially. A group of prominent women journalists have finally had enough: 30 of them have put their names to a statement seeking protection from what they described as “vicious attacks” targeting them on social media that have made it “extremely difficult” for them to carry out their professional duties. In their statement, posted

with the defiant hashtag #AttacksWontSilenceUs, they allege that they have to contend with a torrent of abuse on social media, sometimes from government ministers, whenever they express views critical of the PTI government, specifically its handling of the pandemic. Aspersions are cast on their moral and professional integrity with PTI-affiliated accounts amplifying the vitriol. The journalists have demanded that the ruling party “immediately restrain its members from repeatedly targeting women in the media”.

A distinctive feature of PTI’s long dharna in 2014 was the enthusiastic participation of its female supporters. In fact, the party roundly condemned the right-wing elements who launched into misogynistic diatribes against the women for behaving ‘indecently’. Alas, judging from the journalists’ recent statement, it seems when the party’s male supporters feel ‘threatened’, they resort to the same sexist tropes and gendered slurs that are common currency in the public domain and designed to intimidate assertive women into silence. The party leadership must unequivocally condemn this campaign of intimidation. Some of its leaders, including Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari and Planning Minister Asad Umar have spoken out in response to the journalists’ statement. However, by clubbing sexual harassment with other, far lesser offences, or even completely unrelated ones, they have created a false equivalence and thereby diluted the message that should have been communicated. A survey conducted last year found that online harassment affects 95pc of women journalists in Pakistan. Unlike their male counterparts, they are bombarded with abuse of an explicitly personal or sexualised nature for challenging commonly accepted narratives or questioning the rationale behind government actions. The conformity expected of Pakistani women in general does not make any exception for female journalists, despite the fact they belong to a profession that shapes public opinion. Given the toxic atmosphere in which these women work, the protection for journalists bill cannot be tabled a moment too soon.

Peasants’ rights

THE Hari Welfare Association recently released the State of Peasants’ Rights in Sindh in 2019. This is an annual report on the struggle for the rights of landless peasant and agricultural workers in Sindh. The report hailed two significant developments that took place last year. First, in October 2019, a division bench of the Sindh High Court struck down Section 6 of the Sindh Tenancy

(Amendment) Act, 2013, which had worsened the peasants' exploitation at the hands of the landed class by omitting the prohibition of unpaid labour. Later reports, however, pointed out that the Sindh government appealed to the Supreme Court against the high court's judgement, showing resistance to improving the status of peasants in the province. Then, in December 2019, the Sindh Assembly passed the Sindh Women Agriculture Act, 2019, which provided a social security net for the scores of undocumented women who toil in the fields and rear livestock each day, constituting a significant portion of the total labour force. The legislation ensured minimum wage, freedom from harassment and abuse, an eight-hour workday, sick leave and 120 days of maternity leave for women workers, along with a host of other benefits.

Despite some progress in legislation, there is a long way to go in ensuring workers' inalienable rights and a life of dignity. For instance, on the International Day of Peasants in April, HWA issued a press statement expressing its disappointment with the provincial government, and highlighting the lack of improvement in the lives of rural workers. In the report, HWA reiterates that there is a lack of implementation on ground. But even beyond Sindh, the redistribution of land and workers' rights is central to the uplifting of millions of Pakistanis. Yet they are forgotten or ignored by policymakers due to their lack of standing and voice in society, and due to deliberate and hostile resistance to changing the status quo, further exacerbating the cycle of poverty and powerlessness they are trapped in. The chains tighten.

Running Karachi

IF recent statements in the media are anything to go by, the PPP, MQM and PTI all seem highly concerned about the state of civic affairs in Karachi and are doing their best to revive this once thriving megacity. However, a much uglier reality is on full display, with this city's broken roads, stinking piles of garbage and flowing rivulets of sewage proving that nobody really cares about Karachi or its hapless people. The fact is that all parties are playing politics over Karachi, and even efforts to appear united fall apart soon after they are announced. As reported, a meeting was held on Saturday night at Governor House under the watchful gaze of the security establishment, where representatives of the PPP, PTI and MQM apparently all agreed to form a committee for the metropolis's betterment. But on Sunday, Sindh's information minister issued a cautious statement saying that

running Karachi is “the responsibility of the provincial government”. And on Monday, in an apparent reference to efforts by the federal government to play a greater role in Karachi’s affairs, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah was far more blunt: “under no condition would Sindh share powers with anyone.”

While the federal government should by all means offer support to Sindh in order to run Karachi, there should be no effort by the centre to take over the city and micromanage it. The principle of devolution must be respected and no move towards centralisation of powers can be supported. On the other hand, the federal government and other institutions have apparently spoken up because the Sindh administration has miserably neglected Karachi over its decade-plus rule over the province. By taking over nearly all civic functions, the Sindh government tends to act like a glorified municipality while leaving the MQM-dominated KMC with few powers. However, it is also true that KMC makes very little effort to exercise whatever powers are available with it; for example, making sure neighbourhood lanes and streets are kept clean doesn’t require the intervention of the NDMA or FWO. And it should not be forgotten that the MQM — at the height of its power — played a central role in crippling Karachi’s economy through frequent strikes, along with promoting the toxic practice of ‘china cutting’.

The fact is that no committee, pressure group or NGO can run Karachi. This is a task only an elected, empowered local government can do, with the provincial and federal governments offering substantial support. The tenure of the LGs is coming to an end in Sindh later this month. If the PPP is sincere about its wish to improve Karachi, and honour the principle of devolution, then let it amend the Sindh local bodies law so that all civic functions are returned to the third tier, and new elected municipalities can get to work.

Parliamentary affairs

THE second parliamentary year has ended leaving a lot to be desired in terms of the legislature’s performance. A story published yesterday in this paper paints a fairly dismal picture of the work done by the National Assembly and the conduct of its members on the floor of the house.

The data shows the PTI government depended heavily on ordinances for legislation. Of the bills passed, a large number were linked to requirements of the

Financial Action Task Force that were supported by the opposition parties after behind-the-scenes consultations. Sessions were often marred by rowdy shouting matches with members even coming to blows on a couple of occasions.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's scant attendance record also had an adverse impact on the performance of parliament. He only attended nine sittings (less than 10pc) even though one of his main promises during his time as an opposition leader was to attend proceedings regularly if elected prime minister.

Leader of the Opposition Shahbaz Sharif attended merely three sessions during the year mainly on account of his being away in London for a few months and then getting infected with Covid-19.

It is unfortunate that parliament has suffered from a combination of neglect and poor performance. Both ailments are directly connected to the extreme political polarisation on display since the PTI government took power two years ago.

Read: Ordinances outnumber laws passed by National Assembly

This toxic relationship between the treasury and opposition benches has led to a near-absence of any proper working relationship. Parliament has been treated less as a place to engage in healthy debate and enact laws and more as a forum to run down opponents with choice abuse and wild accusations.

The substance of this hallowed institution has been made subservient to the optics generated on the floor of the house. While senior parliamentarians make an effort to inject a semblance of seriousness into legislative business, the sessions often deteriorate to the level of street fights. This may make for good headlines but leads to an abdication of legislative responsibility.

The prime minister shares part of the blame. If he had taken the Assembly more seriously by attending parliamentary proceedings fairly regularly, its functioning could have been much better. This may change after the ruling party gets control of the Senate next year in March. The PTI may then feel more comfortable drawing up a legislative agenda and demanding greater seriousness from its members. At this stage, one can only hope.

Language matters

ON Saturday, the Supreme Court ordered government officials to refrain from using certain terms in their official correspondence — such as ‘disabled’, ‘physically handicapped’ and ‘mentally retarded’ — to describe people living with disabilities. Instead, in their place, the court encouraged the use of ‘persons with disabilities’ or ‘persons with different abilities’. This is a laudable attempt at creating a kinder and more inclusive culture, and it is reassuring to learn that the judges understand the importance of language in decreasing stigma and harmful perceptions surrounding marginalised communities. Language evolves with time, and it must keep evolving through the generations, as our understanding of certain issues expands and deepens. Of course, words are important. They have the power to uplift and inspire, or “deeply bruise and offend human dignity”, as noted in the verdict, and organisations working on disability issues should be consulted about the terms to be used. But this is only the first step, and until meaningful social, political and economic reforms are implemented on the ground, people with disabilities will continue to feel overlooked and excluded from the mainstream.

Indeed, the social model on disability asserts that, even though individuals have impairments, it is societal barriers that create ‘disability’. One positive recent example of inclusivity is the creation of special tracks and ramps for people with visual and mobility disabilities with the newly launched Peshawar BRT. But given that a significant population of Pakistan lives with some form of disability, according to UN estimates, it is clear that much more needs to be done. Until fairly recently, there was only one law regarding the rights of people with disabilities and their employment. However, since the passage of the 18th Amendment, Sindh and Balochistan have passed new laws. On the other hand, the Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disability Bill, 2020, lapsed in the Senate due to the coronavirus pandemic in May. One hopes it is passed soon.

PTI’s performance

IT has been a difficult two-year run for the PTI government. The scorecard today is a mixed one at best, despite the tall claims made by cabinet ministers and

assorted spokespeople. Leaders of opposition parties such as Shahbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari have issued statements listing a number of failures of the government, while some polls have shown ambivalent responses that belie the extremes pointed out by both the government and the opposition. It may be unfair to judge a government at the two-year mark of its five-year mandate, but it does provide an opportunity to look at some recurring patterns and trends that have marked the performance of Prime Minister Imran Khan's administration.

The PTI hobbled into power carrying the heavy burden of its own lofty rhetoric and expansive promises. That burden did not mix well with the inexperience of wielding power. The first year was therefore marked less by decisive and bold action and more by shaky governance bruised by ill-thought-out decision-making and frequent policy reversals. The handling of the economy — touted as the strongest point of the PTI — was soon judged adversely and the team replaced midstream. The PTI government struggled to define a broad vision that could be sculpted into actionable policy through clarity of ideas and direction. While trying to do everything — from the mundane to the sublime — the government ended up with a vague agenda that promised a lot but was unable to deliver specifics. The Balakot incident and Pakistan's calibrated and mature response to Indian aggression was perhaps Prime Minister Imran Khan's finest hour. This was a pattern that has manifested itself in stable and balanced foreign policy and handling of external issues. However, on the domestic front, the trend has been the opposite: lack of consistency in policy leading to governance problems like sharp price hikes; a politically drenched approach to accountability that has dented the credibility of the process; and a haphazard focus on issues resulting in the neglect of critical structural reform that was supposed to reflect the PTI's manifesto. Such weaknesses have been most visible in Punjab, which is ironical because the country's largest province was expected to be the PTI's crown jewel.

Media space has also shrunk under the PTI's watch. This continues to be a disturbing trend, but the government's approach amounts to a denial of the problem. On two fronts, however, the PTI government can claim due credit: the successful handling of Covid-19 that has brought the pandemic under control; and the Ehsaas programme that has strengthened the social safety network originally conceived by the PPP through the Benazir Income Support Programme. The NCOC has been a success story, and it managed the Covid-19 crisis with clarity and efficiency. If such efficiency can be replicated in other areas of governance, the PTI could certainly improve its performance in its third year.

Unfair assessment

THOUSANDS of O-level and A-level students across Pakistan must have heaved a sigh of relief when Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood announced that Cambridge Assessment International Examinations would review the results of those who received less than the scores predicted for them. Students in Britain, Pakistan and other countries had been holding furious protests at the downgrading of their O-, AS- and A-level examination results. In response, the CAIE announced it would review the decision and that students would be issued new results based on teachers' assessments. Since examinations were not held due to Covid-19, schools had sent in the predicted grades of their students. This data, combined with more information about the schools' overall performance and students' previous work, were used to produce standardised results through a four-step system that relied on what turned out to be a dubious algorithm to calculate grades, resulting in a large percentage of students being marked down. Students who had applied for colleges and universities based on their predicted results saw their dreams being shattered. In Britain, the education secretary had to apologise to students and their families for the fiasco as the grades invited a barrage of criticism. Moreover, the calculations resulted in allegations of bias claiming it favoured students of elite schools over academically strong but economically disadvantaged students.

The corrective action has come a little late in the day for many students who might already have lost a precious year and would have to reapply to colleges and for scholarships. More significantly, this situation has also sparked a debate over the use of artificial intelligence. Machines operate on data and binary information whereas common sense dictates that education is the sum total of mental, physical, creative, emotional and shared experiences. How can these be assessed through numbers? Standardisation is used in many assessment systems worldwide as a way of levelling inequalities; however, in this particular instance, it did just the opposite. One also cannot ignore the fact that the CAIE is a commercial entity, and the complicated process of appealing for review of one's grade can be expensive for many students. Even if they are spared the expense this time, one hopes that the situation will be a lesson for O-level and A-level examination systems to reflect on how they grade, and how they can make provisions for similarly difficult situations that may arise, without compromising the students' future.

Covid-19 vaccine trial

PAKISTAN is now counted among the countries where a trial for a potential Covid-19 vaccine will be conducted. The coronavirus vaccine candidate will be supplied to Pakistan by China, where it has been developed by a unit of the state-owned China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm).

The group is set to test the effects of the vaccine on 200 volunteers from Karachi who will be administered the inactivated virus vaccine. The trial joins a handful of other vaccine candidates around the world to enter Phase 3, and has also been sent to the UAE where it will be tested on thousands of people.

Read: Drap approves clinical trial of Covid-19 vaccine

In this phase, scientists administer the vaccine to thousands of people to observe how many become infected, compared with volunteers who receive a placebo. Phase 3 trials are said to be large enough to show evidence of rare side effects that may have been missed in earlier studies.

The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan has given the green light for the trial and recommended it be held at the Indus Hospital, where each participant will be paid Rs50,000.

That Pakistan is included in a trial linked to such important global research is significant. It also raises the hopes that, if this particular trial is successful, the vaccine will be available in Pakistan at “affordable rates”, according to one official.

Like many other vaccines being tested, the Sinopharm endeavour is part of a global race and is being facilitated by the WHO. It is imperative that the government fulfil its trial obligations with utmost professionalism and by maintaining ethical standards. The proper documentation of the data gleaned from the trial is important, as is the question of which volunteers are selected and then compensated.

In a situation where desperate people will flock to volunteer for the trial given the hefty compensation, trial administrators must ensure participants express genuine consent and are aware of the benefits and risks of vaccination. The trial must maintain the highest scientific, clinical and ethical standards.

Pension burden

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has described the government's rapidly increasing pension bill as a far more serious problem than the huge power-sector debt. That might sound a bit exaggerated at a time when the government continues to make its pension payments but appears unable to liquidate the circular debt. However, the time is not far off when the ballooning pension expenditure will become our biggest budgetary challenge, further squeezing the space for development unless, as Mr Khan rightly asserted at a recent cabinet meeting, it is tackled quickly. The federal and provincial pension liabilities are already becoming fiscally unsustainable. For example, the country's consolidated federal and provincial pension obligations are estimated to have reached Rs1tr for the current financial year, or equal to a quarter of the total taxes collected by FBR last fiscal. The data shows that the annual federal pension payments of Rs470bn, which mostly consisted of military pensions and excluded retirement benefits paid by SOEs to employees, have grown close to the annual wage bill. Similarly, at the provincial level, Punjab has booked an expenditure of Rs250.7bn, or just Rs15bn less than what it spent on development last year, for pension payments during the ongoing fiscal. Punjab's pension budget has spiked by an annual average of 24.1pc since 2011. The story in the other provinces is not much different. If the current state of affairs is allowed to continue, the entire pension system will become insolvent.

Multiple factors have contributed to the exponential growth in the pension payments of the government in recent years: a) the public sector's growing size; b) increase in life expectancy; c) a skewed unfunded public pension system that lets children and grandchildren of retirees draw pension payments; and d) hikes in pension benefits to offset the impact of inflation. Mr Khan also hinted at hiring a foreign consultant to suggest pension reforms. It is not for the first time that a government has enunciated its plans to address the challenges posed by an unsustainable public pension system. Various efforts in the last couple of decades have resulted in minor changes, with no significant shift in the existing unfunded, pay-as-you-go defined retirement benefits scheme or reduction in the liability. The purpose of future reforms should be to stop growth in the government's pension-related liabilities, reduce the present pension bill and restructure the system on a self-sustaining model.

Different countries have successfully adopted different models in order to avoid the dangers associated with the pay-as-you-go-based pension system in recent years. One is the shift from the current unfunded defined pension benefits to a fully funded, defined contributory pension scheme with the government guaranteeing a minimum monthly income after retirement. Whatever model is adopted, the long-term focus should be to ensure post-retirement income security for government employees while reducing the burden of pension payments on the budget.

A tragic murder

IT is an image that must sear itself into the conscience of a nation: a mother, her face contorted in a howl of grief, arms stretched upwards as though asking heaven ‘why?’ and a father, weeping helplessly over the body of their dead son, the earth soaked in the young man’s blood. The victim was Hayat Baloch, a BSc physiology student at Karachi University and the first in his family to go to a higher education institute. With his degree, he believed he could find a job that would bring his parents relief from a financially strapped existence: that dream died with him on a dusty road in Turbat, Balochistan, last week. Hayat and his father were harvesting dates at a farm when passing Frontier Corps vehicles were targeted by an IED. Some FC personnel who had fanned out in the area to search for the culprits came upon Hayat. They dragged him to the road, shot him multiple times and left him to die. His father pleaded in vain that his son had been working alongside him all day.

Extrajudicial killings, often in the form of staged encounters, are a stain on this country’s reputation, belying its claim to be a democracy with constitutionally protected rights to security of person and due process. Hayat’s murder created an uproar largely because the image described above went viral. The FC has handed over the alleged killer to the police, and Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari condemned the “brazen killing” as “absolutely unacceptable” saying that an inquiry must be held. One hopes that justice will indeed be served. Usually, however, most victims of this crime remain mere statistics. Not only do extrajudicial killings take place with impunity in the sparsely populated reaches of Balochistan, but elsewhere in the country too, including Karachi — a consequence of the carte blanche certain sections of law-enforcement have been given in the name of fighting against militant/separatist groups. Who can forget

former SSP Rao Anwar under whom, according to the police's own record, at least 444 people were slain in fake encounters? A public furore similar to the one over Hayat's death finally led to Rao being indicted for Naqeebullah Mehsud's murder in January 2018. But the now retired cop remains free on bail while his trial drags on and key prosecution witnesses turn hostile. Such is the bitter reality of how the state, more often than not, treats extrajudicial killings.

Scientific excellence

RECENTLY, Pakistan-origin quantum astrophysicist Dr Nergis Mavalvala was named the new dean of the MIT School of Science. A remarkable achievement by the physicist known for her ground-breaking work in gravitational-wave detection, many Pakistanis unreservedly took pride in the news.

But while Dr Mavalvala received her early education in Pakistan, she and several others like her reached the high positions they did through their own efforts and opportunities presented to them in other countries. Unfortunately, Pakistan has done little to invest in the sciences or to promote scientific thinking.

So while we celebrate Dr Mavalvala's achievements, we must ask ourselves: had Dr Mavalvala continued to study and work in Pakistan, would she have been able to reach the position she is in today? Would she have the space or resources to carry out her breakthrough scientific work here? And would her talent have been recognised by either the government or the society she lived in? Or would we have fixated on her identity, focusing on who she is, rather than what she can achieve, thus propping up barriers to her success?

Consider the genius and tragedy of one of Pakistan's greatest minds. Born to a family of modest means in Jhang, Dr Abdus Salam credited the local college he attended for laying the foundations of his academic career, and remained grateful to his teachers for sparking his intellectual curiosity.

In 1951, he rejected an opportunity to attend Princeton, so he could secure a teaching job at Government College Lahore. Instead of recognising his potential, though, he was made a football coach at the institute — the first of many heartbreaks he faced in the newly formed country.

Like Dr Mavalvala, he belonged to a religious minority community. In 1979, Dr Salam won the Nobel Prize in physics for his work on the electroweak unification

theory that implies the existence of the 'God particle' which was subsequently discovered at CERN in 2012. Whether his brilliance was ever truly understood and celebrated in his home country is debatable, and that is Pakistan's tragedy

Militancy concern

WHEN terrorist organisations splinter, it often bodes well for law-enforcement agencies: such divisions result from internal rifts that can be exploited to weaken the adversary. However, when splinter groups rejoin their parent organisations, or merge with other groups to form larger outfits, it is a worrying development. In an online post, Mohammed Khurasani, the main spokesman for the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, announced that Jamaatul Ahrar, its breakaway faction, and Hizbul Ahrar, a splinter group of the JuA, have been dissolved and merged into the TTP. The leaders of both, he said, have sworn allegiance to TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud. Efforts to bring about the rapprochement have been underway for some time, and reports indicate that the former TTP and later JuA spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan who inexplicably escaped from the security forces' custody in early 2020 may have something to do with it.

Law enforcement will surely be cognisant of the potential for increased violence in the wake of the recent development. Terrorist attacks have declined significantly since the past few years due to sustained operations by security forces and the police, but by no means is the threat entirely vanquished. In 2019, militant violence in Pakistan overall was down by 19pc over the previous year, but in KP it was no different from 2018. In fact, 91pc of terrorist attacks last year took place in Balochistan and KP: 158 acts of terrorism across the country were claimed by violent extremist groups including the TTP (which is most active in North Waziristan, Zhob and Dera Ismail Khan), JuA, HuA and other similar outfits. The HuA, whose targets largely comprise the police and security forces, is also said to possess significant resources for carrying out suicide bombings. Meanwhile, JuA, which broke away from the TTP in August 2014 has carried out some gruesome acts of mass murder, including the Easter Sunday massacre in February 2016 in Lahore which left at least 75 dead and 350 injured. Their merging with the TTP illustrates the tenacity of violent extremist elements in their effort to remain relevant and effective.

To successfully tackle such groups requires taking a broader perspective and a regional approach. In late 2019 and earlier this year, the Afghan forces and their international allies, and separately the Afghan Taliban, inflicted severe losses on the hideouts in Afghanistan of the militant Islamic State group which has carried out horrific attacks in their country. However, much of the TTP, along with the two groups that have returned to its fold, remains comfortably ensconced in that country, mostly in Kunar, Nangarhar and Khost provinces. President Ashraf Ghani's government must realise that while the TTP's malevolence is directed at Pakistan today, tomorrow — if strategically advantageous — his homeland could be in its cross hairs. The need for cross-border collaboration in the fight against terrorism cannot be stressed enough.

Different verdicts

TWO different high courts — Sindh and Islamabad — have concurrently given opposing judgements on similar petitions contesting the formation of the sugar inquiry commission. The latter was set up in March to investigate the sudden spike in the sweetener's price last winter. The petitioners — the sugar mill owners — had also challenged the validity of its findings, requesting the courts to stop any action against them on the basis of the impugned report. The Sindh High Court had on Monday struck down the constitution of the commission because the government didn't follow the procedure for its formation. It had also failed to issue a gazette notification about its constitution within the stipulated time period and the commission denied the petitioners the opportunity of being heard. The next day, the Islamabad High Court passed a different verdict, which contradicted the Sindh High Court decision although it had duly noted that the commission conducted only a fact-finding exercise with no mandate or power to impose any penalty.

This is not for the first time that two high courts have taken opposing views on the same issue and given conflicting judgements. It has happened before, requiring the Supreme Court to break the impasse. Until that happens, both judgements will continue to hold in the courts' respective territorial jurisdiction. The Sindh High Court ruling offers some relief to the sugar producers to the extent of suspension of actions announced by the government against them on the basis of the commission's report (unless the apex court reverses the decision). Nevertheless, the court has ordered the anti-corruption agencies and

regulatory bodies to carry out fresh, independent and separate inquiries into the scam. That appears unlikely until the final decision by the apex court settles the matter one way or another. In order to delay action against them, a major producer, Jahangir Tareen, has in the meanwhile approached the Lahore High Court to prevent the FIA from taking action against his companies. In the coming days, we may witness more sugar firms seeking 'relief' from action against them. In the past, we have seen businessmen delay payment of taxes and fees, and 'adverse' government inquiries and actions against them for years. The GIDC case that lingered for nine years is just one example. The apex court should devise a mechanism to discourage multiple petitions on the same matter in different courts besides ensuring decisions on such issues are given within a stipulated time frame.

The polio battle

DISTURBING reports have yet again surfaced about the manhandling of polio workers in Bhawalnagar and Faisalabad as immunisation campaigns resume after a hiatus of at least five months. In the latest incidents, residents in three separate areas of Bhawalnagar, besides refusing to get their children vaccinated, hurled threats at the vaccinators and manhandled them while also harassing female health workers. Meanwhile in Faisalabad, a couple thrashed female polio workers after they rang the doorbell of their house. Earlier in January, two polio workers were killed by unidentified gunmen in Swabi, while in December last year, two policemen deputed on security duty were shot dead in Lower Dir. Polio eradication efforts in Pakistan had already witnessed grave setbacks since the beginning of 2019. Along with a steady and heavy rise in the number of wild and vaccine-derived polio cases (a total of 149 as compared to 12 and eight cases in 2018 and 2017), a malicious propaganda against polio eradication efforts further fuelled public resentment, causing an increase in the number of parents refusing to get their children vaccinated. Then the unwelcome advent of Covid-19 exacerbated matters as polio immunisation campaigns and most routine immunisation also remained suspended between March and July, with resources being diverted towards measures to curb the pandemic. Hence, in this period, some 40m children in the country missed vaccinations against polio, while around 60 were diagnosed with the wild poliovirus between January and July.

Like Covid-19, polio is also a highly infectious illness and health experts are concerned that the months-long gaps in immunisation efforts might have reversed the headway made towards the eradication of the disease. Targeted vaccination drives have again resumed in several parts of the country and health workers are once more putting their lives on the line for minimal compensation. Perhaps the authorities could learn from the Covid-19 success and set up a similar, centralised pool of resources for polio eradication to drive this menace out of the country.

New district in Karachi

ON the face of it, the PPP-led Sindh government's move on Thursday to carve a seventh district out of Karachi seems like a harmless administrative decision. But scratch the surface and listen to the opposition's clamour and one realises that something deeper, more sinister is afoot. The provincial cabinet has sought to create Keamari district, as well as more potential new districts in Sindh, "for the convenience of local people", as the chief minister put it. If this really leads to better governance and service delivery, then there should be nothing to worry about. However, if these moves — specifically administrative changes in Karachi — are designed to 'improve' the chances of the PPP grabbing a few more seats in the metropolis, especially when local government elections are due, then such political ploys can only be condemned as gerrymandering. At this point, all evidence points to the fact that the PPP has performed an administrative sleight of hand by creating Keamari district.

Practically all major political players with stakes in Karachi — the MQM, PTI, Jamaat-i-Islami and PSP — have slammed the provincial government's decision. Some parties say the move will add to the ethnic divide in the metropolis, while others assert that the PPP is trying to engineer a victory in LG polls. Indeed, the decision came suddenly, with no debate either in the Sindh Assembly or the KMC's City Council. This adds credence to accusations that Sindh's ruling party is trying to 'create' a power base for itself in Karachi through administrative jugglery. Interestingly, the PPP claims that more districts will make it easier to govern Sindh. However, under Pervez Musharraf's LG system, Karachi was administratively divided into 18 towns and though that system had its flaws, it arguably worked much better than the set-up the PPP introduced under the Sindh Local Government Act, 2013. For Karachi, the latter law has been a total

disaster, with the provincial government hogging almost all civic powers and creating a practically toothless KMC. The PPP considers itself the champion of devolution, accusing — often with good reason — the centre of grabbing powers that belong to the provinces. But when it comes to empowering the districts and local bodies in Sindh, the PPP wants to micromanage the entire province, particularly Karachi.

Instead of making cosmetic changes by carving out new districts, let the PPP introduce a new LG law in the Sindh Assembly with the consensus of all parties. In particular, water, sewerage, solid waste and other key civic functions of Karachi, Hyderabad, Larkana and Sukkur should be the responsibility of elected mayors of these cities. If the PPP genuinely wants to win the hearts and votes of the people of Karachi, let it serve the city by giving it an elected, empowered municipality, instead of trying to control the metropolis through dicey measures.

Decrepit railway

THE Supreme Court has given the government four weeks to come up with a roadmap to revamp the country's battered railway infrastructure. During the hearing of a suo motu case related to the colossal losses suffered by the railway, a three-judge bench ordered the Planning Commission to submit a report before the court on initiatives it plans to implement for restructuring the railway. The court has of late repeatedly asked the authorities concerned to improve the railway, while referring to the increasing incidence of train accidents as a result of the crumbling infrastructure and poor enforcement of safety protocols. In an ideal situation, few, if any, would approve of suo motu judicial intervention in the public service sphere that is the executive's responsibility. That has not been the sentiment in this case.

Once a dominant means for large-scale cargo movement and the preferred mode of transportation, rail travel has become extremely risky owing to years of lack of investment, corruption, mismanagement, political and bureaucratic interference, and what not. Labour unions backed by politico-religious parties must also share the responsibility for the downfall of Pakistan Railways. Thousands of railway employees don't show up for work at all. It would not be unfair to point out here that PR has become near impossible to manage. On top of that, the authorities seem hardly bothered about public concerns over passenger safety. Recently,

the government was reported to have approved a plan to restructure the railway by setting up a holding company, and creating separate entities for handling the functions of freight, passenger traffic and infrastructure development to turn it into a profitable enterprise. Since its details remain unclear at the moment, it is difficult to comment on the effectiveness of the proposal. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear. No plan can succeed without trimming the size of the organisation and involving private businesses in its management and operations. Moreover, the government will need billions of dollars to improve the infrastructure, which is also not possible without private capital. The ML-1 project being launched under the CPEC initiative is not enough. More important, the railway will have to get out of passenger operations and cargo business. Private companies should be invited to participate and compete with one another in running passenger trains and cargo services. In exchange, they will have to pay the railway for the use of infrastructure and share a part of their revenue profits.

Health insurance

ON Thursday, Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated the Sehat Insaf Card that will provide health cover of Rs1m to every deserving family in the province. Mr Khan, in line with the spirit of the second anniversary of his rule, may have allowed himself to lavish a few overly generous compliments on the work of his team members, but this was a case that was deserving of his proud appreciation. He summed up the effects of the initiative that has been a defining project of the PTI government, and which has the potential to set in motion a process in the other provinces to provide desperate Pakistanis a much-needed healthcare umbrella. The people of this country need the relief and reassurance that a health insurance scheme is supposed to embody. A successful pilot programme would obviously lead to demands for similar initiatives in the rest of the country. Something that has been done by one of the provinces should not be impossible to recreate in other units of the federation.

Given just how grim the situation is, the follow-up must come fast. What Prime Minister Khan needs to do immediately is to ensure that his message to Punjab and Balochistan is properly acted upon. They need to emulate KP's pioneering stride as a top priority. If the model proves to be successful and is not politicized, even Sindh — which has, often justifiably, voiced its criticism of federal government policies — may see the worth of it. Meanwhile, in Peshawar and

elsewhere in KP, the system must live up to its billing and try and avoid the fate of so many other concepts that were imported with much fanfare but which lost their efficacy after being corrupted during the implementation stage. Insurance is a serious business and requires 100pc compliance once a guarantee is given. Once an individual or a family is assured of health cover, there must be no room for denying it. The government must ensure that everyone has access to quality healthcare.

The politics of deals

THE PTI government has announced it will exhaust all legal options to bring back former prime minister Nawaz Sharif from London. Addressing the media, Information Minister Shibli Faraz said the PML-N leader will not be allowed to evade the law on the pretext of a “fudged” medical report. He said Nawaz Sharif was doing politics from London and the government would ask NAB to contact the Foreign Office in order to ensure his return to Pakistan. Other cabinet ministers have also issued similar statements indicating that Prime Minister Imran Khan has prioritised this issue.

The court had allowed Mr Sharif to travel abroad for treatment after relevant government officials had authenticated his medical reports. Since he was being treated in a government hospital by a panel of doctors, the Punjab government was directly involved in all procedures and was privy to relevant information. These medical reports indicated that Mr Sharif’s treatment needed to be continued abroad and doctors had signed off on this recommendation. The reports were submitted in court and Shahbaz Sharif had guaranteed that his elder brother would return to Pakistan after the completion of his treatment. The federal government had accordingly given him permission to travel to London. Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid has said Mr Sharif went abroad after a deal with the establishment and Prime Minister Imran Khan was not aware of it. The former prime minister has kept a relatively low profile except for some photographs showing him stepping out for coffee, etc. However, he is reported to be giving directions to his party and also conversing with allies including JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman. PML-N leaders maintain his treatment is ongoing and he will return when the doctors advise him to do so.

The government's belated concern over his travel abroad makes little sense when its own officials verified Mr Sharif's medical reports and gave him permission to fly out. If the government now feels there was something wrong with the reports, it may want to first haul up those officials from within its own ranks — including the Punjab health minister — who confirmed their veracity. Only then would it make sense for the government to cry foul. Otherwise, the logic of its protestations at this stage wears fairly thin. There is, however, a larger issue at stake and it pertains to the culture of political deals that often overrides the dictates of law. This is not the first time that Nawaz Sharif has gone abroad as a result of some reported understanding. Such deals involve two parties and if blame has to be apportioned it will need to be shared. Pakistan's politics require greater transparency in order to inject a dose of credibility in decisions taken at the highest level. Clandestine understandings undercut the trust of the people in the workings of the government.

FM's China visit

FOREIGN MINISTER Shah Mahmood Qureshi's visit to China was a timely reaffirmation of Islamabad-Beijing ties. Kashmir was certain to figure prominently in Mr Qureshi's talk with his Chinese counterpart, Mr Wang Yi, and it did, along with other issues such as CPEC. Not least important on the agenda was the scheduled visit of President Xi Jinping to Islamabad next month.

Another highlight of the communiqué released after talks on Friday was the pledge by the two countries to continue to work together on the development of a vaccine against the coronavirus. The timing of this renewal of a joint pledge was significant.

The meeting of the long-time allies came against the backdrop of major international events, including the mid-June border skirmish between China and India, the most serious incident of its kind in the last 50 years of a tense relationship. The clash had raised the spectre of diplomats from various countries entering the scene and playing a power game with cold, calculated realignment being the ultimate buzzword.

Ever since, the experts have indulged in 'creating' likely and unlikely alliances out of actors who are driven by 'new realities'. They have flaunted all kinds of scenarios and have predicted new blocs on the international stage.

Newer elements have been introduced but perhaps the most prominent of the trajectories discussed in the circumstances is the one that projects India forging even closer ties with the US in the near future. Pakistan has been quite keen to remind Washington about how important it is that the balance the US administration aspires to in its South Asian policy — at least in words — must actually be reflected in how it is seen to deal with the most crucial causes in the region, namely Afghanistan, CPEC and Kashmir.

Islamabad is also following a strategy where it is striving to strengthen its ties with the dependable Chinese capital as well as exploring new reliable partners for joint ventures in the international community. The Pakistan-China relationship is a central pillar on which this policy is based. Be it New Delhi's excesses in besieged India-held Kashmir, or the matter of asserting Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, or, of course, the CPEC project, it has always been in the common interest of Beijing and Islamabad to cooperate with each other. Recent international events could, in fact, have brought the two neighbours even closer.

Bad light stoppages

THE countless rain and bad light stoppages during the drawn second cricket Test between Pakistan and England at Southampton recently have earned the ire of former players and critics who have called for an immediate solution to this age-old problem. The farcical scenes of players repeatedly going off the field on account of poor light, even when the floodlights were on, dismayed millions who had been looking forward to the series after the forced four-month lull in the game due to the pandemic.

Not since the Pakistan-England Test at Lord's in 1987 has a Test been so badly affected by weather interruptions in England. The umpires officiating in the match have also been widely criticised for their strict interpretation of the light regulations, while scores of former players denounced hosts England and Wales Cricket Board for not anticipating such a scenario. The ICC, too, has been accused of living in the dark ages with reference to the bad light laws, especially when solutions such as playing under floodlights and using pink or white balls have been successfully adopted in limited-overs cricket and day-night Tests. The ICC is now set to discuss the issue at the next meeting of its cricket committee while the ECB has implemented early starts in the ongoing third Test to

compensate for lost time caused by weather interruptions. A permanent solution to this 'historical' problem, however, will require the players, especially the captains, to be willing to embrace the idea of playing under floodlights and with pink balls. Concerns expressed previously by the captains of England, Australia and India about the risk of injury to batsmen and fielders can't be totally ignored. However, these are problems encountered in broad daylight too and there is nothing to stop the players from wearing protective equipment should they feel the need. The ICC and the respective cricket boards must ensure that the players stay on the field to bring top-level action to the fans, because the game must go on.

Iran sanctions threat

THE Trump administration's handling of its relationship with Iran can best be described as disastrous. Donald Trump and his acolytes have consistently used confrontational, hostile rhetoric against the Islamic Republic, as if they were trying to lure Tehran into the battlefield. While at times it seemed as if war between the two was imminent — such as when the US assassinated senior Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Iraq earlier this year — thankfully armed conflict has been avoided up till now. But it seems that in the last few months of his term, Trump and company are again trying to spark a conflict with Iran. The latest example of this emerged in the UN Security Council on Friday, when 13 out of 15 UNSC members reportedly opposed America's move to re-impose sanctions against Iran under the 2015 nuclear deal. As was rightly pointed out, the US had no legal standing to do so because it had left the accord in 2018. In snide comments, the US secretary of state chided his European allies for "siding with the ayatollahs".

It is difficult to say whether or not the Europeans and other UNSC members are siding with Iran's clerical leaders. What is quite clear, though, is that the international community, including even some of America's closest allies, has no appetite for a confrontation with Iran, which will definitely ensue if UN sanctions once again take effect. This was also reflected by the fact that a recent American move to renew an arms embargo against Iran was similarly rejected by the UNSC. While team Trump may be looking for ways to look tough on Tehran and grab a few more votes in the twilight of what could be a one-term presidency, this brinkmanship can have disastrous results for world peace. From tearing up the

nuclear deal to assassinating Soleimani, the Trump White House's reckless behaviour vis-à-vis Iran has miraculously avoided a conflict. However, the next few months are critical, especially if the Trump administration tries any adventurism in the Middle East ahead of the US election.

As it is, the temperature in the Gulf is rising, especially after the UAE-Israeli peace deal, largely seen as engineered by the US. Iran feels that its arch-enemy Israel now has a staging post in Tehran's backyard. Earlier this week, the Iranians seized an Emirati ship after Tehran said the UAE coastguard killed two of its fishermen. Such incidents, if not avoided, have the potential to balloon into something bigger. Which is why all sides need to act rationally. Primarily, the Trump administration must jettison its incendiary anti-Iran rhetoric. Iran, for its part, must avoid aggressive responses as war will not be beneficial for its battered economy. Moreover, the Gulf sheikhdoms are free to establish relations with whoever they want, as long as they don't become pawns of extra-regional powers looking for a fight in the Middle East.

Maternal mortality

RELATIVE overall improvement in health services over the last decade has resulted in a decrease in the country's maternal mortality rate from 276 deaths to an average of 186 deaths per 100,000 live births, according to the latest Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey. Hearteningly, the survey reveals that a greater number of pregnant women are also seeking medical care due to enhanced awareness about their condition. The provincial breakdown of maternal mortality rates, however, shows that this improvement is not consistent across the country. With 157 deaths per 100,000 live births, Punjab has the lowest MMR; followed by KP at 165; then Sindh at 224; while Balochistan has the highest, at 298 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. The lowest MMR of all regions in the country is in Azad Jammu & Kashmir at 104 deaths, while in Gilgit-Baltistan it is 157. This data indicates that though health services and women's access to them might have improved in Punjab and KP, leading to the decrease in overall maternal mortality rate, Sindh and Balochistan still have a lot of ground to cover in terms of improving and enabling adequate service delivery in this area. Similarly, the disparities in health services in urban and rural areas are also reflected in the corresponding MMRs. The ratio of deaths is 26pc higher in rural areas — 199 as compared to 158 in urban areas.

Pakistan used to have one of the highest MMRs in the region. The overall decrease is encouraging, but this progress can easily be reversed if the authorities keep shying away from dealing with the problems that contribute to it. One of the biggest factors is the high number of pregnancies in women. The country's population continues to grow at an alarming rate at the expense of women's health. The MMR may have reduced over the last decade, but Pakistan has the highest fertility rate in Asia and the fifth largest population in the world. This means that a large population of women undergo more pregnancies than their bodies can bear. Birth control remains a controversial subject due to opposition by the country's religious right, but it is illogical to expect a sustained reduction in MMR without tackling the issue of family planning. The authorities must not shy away from doing what needs to be done for the sake of the health of millions of women and children in the country.

Safety during Muharram

IN light of Muharram processions, according to a recent news report, more than 6,000 police personnel will be deployed in three districts of the Hazara division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Given the reality of attacks on processions in the past, and the sheer number of targeted attacks on members of the Shia community, it is understandable why security would be heightened this month. While there has been greater security in the country in recent years, there have been sporadic attacks that undermine the relative peace in the country. On the eve of Independence Day, gunmen walked up to a traffic policeman and shot him dead in Karachi. The fifth policeman to be targeted in the city in a span of just one month, Head Constable Syed Mohammad Ali Rizvi was said to not have been in uniform on the day he was murdered; authorities suspect it to be a sectarian killing.

Pakistan has a brutal history of sectarian killings. From pilgrims and schoolchildren to doctors and intellectuals, thousands of Shias have been killed for their beliefs since the 1980s. The bloodshed intensified in the 1990s, and perhaps saw its bloodiest phase in the 2000s, with the rise of the Pakistani Taliban and other sectarian groups. In December 2009, an Ashura procession in Karachi became the target of a suicide explosion, killing around 40 people. In September 2010, three explosions targeting a procession in Lahore led to the death of another 40 people; two days later, another 73 were killed in a bomb

blast targeting an Al Quds procession. In February 2012, 18 predominantly Shia passengers on a bus travelling from Rawalpindi to Gilgit-Baltistan were separated on the basis of their identity and shot dead by militants dressed in army uniform. In May 2013, the Hazara community of Quetta was ferociously targeted, with 115 people killed on Alamdar Road; and another 110 killed a month later in Hazara Town. Clearly, the authorities cannot afford to let down their guard even for a moment during Muharram.

Pepco's revival

AROUND eight years after Pepco was 'abolished' — on paper the power company was not wound up formally under the law — for failing to do its job, the government has decided to revive it to bring erratic power distribution companies (Discos) under centralised control. This is being done as part of a power-sector reform project, which will ultimately lead to privatisation of Discos and the creation of a competitive electricity market in the country. According to the proposed plan, power distribution firms will be asked to hire Pepco as their 'management agent' through a 10-year, extendable agreement. In exchange, Discos will pay a fee to finance Pepco's expenditure. The management fee will reportedly be charged from power consumers. The arrangement is expected to improve management and governance of the power sector in general and Discos in particular. However, few expect the repetition of the experiment to deliver the goal: improvement in the performance of distribution entities.

The power distribution firms were extracted from Wapda back in 1998 as part of a reform programme aimed at corporatisation of the distribution entities under Pepco to prepare them for sale to the private sector. The scheme didn't work. Instead, experts point out, that the independence allowed to Discos in the name of corporatisation without their privatisation spawned festering issues such as the growing circular debt, distribution losses, unrecovered electricity bills and the crumbling electricity distribution infrastructure.

The solution to the issues is not to be found in repeating mistakes or reintroducing failed models. These issues can only be resolved by allowing room to private companies to participate in the business of electricity distribution, and creating a competitive market where both retailers and customers have the option to terminate their agreements without hassle. At present, the government

is trying to evolve a model for a 'competitive market' to allow private generation companies to enter into direct electricity sale/ purchase agreements with public-sector distribution companies or bulk private consumers on a 'take-and-pay' basis. The purpose is to give them and their customers a wider choice to sell or buy electricity at a mutually agreed price. This is expected to create competition among generation companies and make the price affordable for bulk buyers. Is this enough though? The government needs to take the debate towards privatisation of the retail electricity business. It could consider issuing overlapping distribution licences to two or more private companies competing for the same set of customers in the same area as is being practised in the UK and several other countries. This model will preclude the sale of assets of Discos, which is hardly possible even in the distant future. The overlapping licences will ensure that companies constantly strive to improve their services in addition to giving consumers the option to change their service provider if they decide to do so for better services and rates.

Banning groups

THERE is no shortage of banned militant groups in Pakistan, and with the proscription of a heretofore largely unknown outfit called Khatam-ul-Ambia by the state, the grand total of such organisations comes to 77. According to the government, the aforementioned group is an offshoot of Ansarul Hussain, a Shia set-up reportedly formed to recruit fighters against the militant Islamic State group. Ansarul Hussain was itself proscribed in 2016, which illustrates the problem with the state's approach to dealing with armed groups: the list of banned outfits grew largely because while the authorities have proscribed groups and detained or kept a watch on some of their prominent figures, it could do more to dismantle the structure that allows such groups to thrive. This has largely been the pattern ever since the first noticeable efforts against armed groups in the country were made during the Musharraf era.

Of course, the foundations for the infrastructure of militancy in Pakistan were laid during the Zia era, when anti-Soviet jihadi groups were patronised by the state, and supported by the US and the Saudis to do the needful in Afghanistan. A concomitant development during this period was the rise of anti-Shia hate groups such as Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan and its even deadlier offshoot, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, which transformed into this country's most feared sectarian death

squad. This unsavoury situation gave rise to Shia vigilante groups, such as Sipah-i-Mohammad, and the 1990s and 2000s saw armed sectarian and jihadi groups multiply manifold, at one time posing a serious challenge to the writ of the state. Today, the list of banned groups is more varied, as it also features Baloch and Sindhi separatist outfits. While the changed geopolitical situation in the aftermath of 9/11 made Pervez Musharraf take action against some violent outfits, the general failed to take measures to totally uproot these groups. That is why banned groups remained active, mostly by changing names. As has been frequently stressed in these columns, action against violent actors needs to be holistic. Leaders and cadres of terrorist outfits need to be tried and convicted in court, while their financial and other assets must be seized to cut off sources of funding. While action has been taken to meet FATF requirements, and measures against militancy have weakened terrorist structures, stepping up its pace in this direction would be very much in Pakistan's own interest.

Smog season ahead

THE masks may not come off as yet in Pakistan even if the Covid-19 threat that has loomed large over the world subsides. Wide parts of the country are once again in danger of walking into the misty, foggy phase, referred to as the fifth season in the calendar of acutely suffering places such as Lahore. The reference is of course to the infamous smog that descends around October-November. Mugginess has been on the increase, leaving masses of people demanding rescue action and leading to calls locally and internationally for emergency measures. A case filed in the Lahore High Court has drawn attention to the environmental risk involved. It is part of a campaign in which individuals and groups — from students to Amnesty International — have urged life-saving action against the deadly annual smog. During the proceedings last week, the court asked all Punjab's deputy commissioners to ensure a ban on the burning of stubble in the winter. Stubble-burning, which is undertaken to spruce up the ground for the cultivation of the next crop, has been identified as a major contributor to the smog. Pakistanis have blamed India for releasing pollutants into the atmosphere. It is said the direction of the wind is such that the particles come towards Pakistani territory, and that farmers in India resort to stubble-burning as the most convenient if not the only technique to rid the soil of the unwanted remains of the previous harvest.

Together with this claim, there is evidence that the burning of bushes etc by growers on this side too is a major cause, hence the directions to the deputy commissioners — who should have the authority at their disposal to block unwanted releases into the environment. The court’s message must also act as a reminder to everyone concerned to act in advance. There is no reason for any authority, which can take some preventive measures now, to behave in November as if it has been struck by the smog out of the blue.

A rosy picture?

THE recent ‘economic turnaround’ has taken many by surprise and spawned optimism about a quicker-than-expected recovery from coronavirus-inflicted losses from the last quarter of the previous fiscal year.

Prompted by early signs, Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted that “the economy is on the right track” as the current account balance swung into a surplus of \$424m in July — the fourth monthly surplus since October — from a deficit of \$100m in June and \$613m a year ago.

It is true that short-term trends indicate that the economy is returning on the path of growth. The trade balance is narrowing on surging exports. Workers’ remittances are increasing. Industry is picking up. The FBR has collected 23pc more taxes in the first month of this fiscal against a target of Rs243bn. Domestic demand for products such as cement, motorcycles, cars, tractors, etc is witnessing a spike as the economy opens up amid a miraculous but perplexing decline in infections. The stock market has bounced back on expectations of better future corporate profitability. Real estate prices are rising on the back of concessions announced for construction and housing.

The forecasts of a slow journey towards recovery seem to be a thing of the past. However, it is also time to pause for a moment and ask if the current upturn is sustainable? Are we really back on the right track?

Some economic improvements appear as a one-off, at least for now. For example, export recovery owes itself to the pent-up demand unleashed by relaxation in Covid-19 restrictions around the globe as buyers rebuild their depleted inventories and release stuck-up payments for pre-pandemic shipments. Similarly, we don’t yet know for certain the factors responsible for the

surge in remittances at a time when the global economy is in disarray and thousands of Pakistanis have lost jobs in the Gulf countries.

Whether or not exports and remittances can maintain the present momentum will become clear only in the second quarter of the ongoing fiscal year. On top of that, much of the ongoing activity is on account of the temporary relief granted by the IMF through the suspension of its harsh economic stabilisation policies, which had engendered one of the deepest economic slumps even before the arrival of the virus. What happens when the IMF programme is revived is anyone's guess. Most likely, the current recovery will hit the brakes once again. Nor are we sure as to how the virus will behave over the next several months at home and abroad.

Last but not least, some of the potential adverse effects of the pandemic on businesses and banks put on a hold by State Bank measures to counter the impact of the health crisis could well be felt by the end of the March. While optimism is in order, we should perceive early wins with caution.

Dangerous words

IT is disturbing how people in public office think so little of calling for individuals to be put to death on one pretext or another. On Monday, Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan while speaking to the media accused the leadership of the PPP and PML-N of having ruthlessly looted the public exchequer and said that such individuals were liable to be killed. In response, PML-N spokesperson Marriyum Aurangzeb excoriated him for resorting to what she termed the "language of containers". Actually Mr Khan's utterance was worse: in the light of the bloody history of vigilante 'justice' and religious extremism in this country, his words can be described as incitement to violence. They deserve to be condemned at the highest level of the party. There is a vast difference between political rhetoric which can make its point intelligently without resorting to abuse, and that which springs from a reductive thought process heedless of the consequences. To tag someone as 'liable to be killed' actually can and does lead to murder in Pakistan: the assassination of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer is but one example.

Around a year ago, Federal Minister for Water Resources Faisal Vawda cavalierly declared on a couple of TV talk shows that "If we had it in our power to

hang 5,000 people, the future of 220m people would be transformed”. He then went on to suggest that the Constitution, which enshrines fundamental rights to security of person and due process, was an impediment to true ‘progress’. Mr Vawda’s pronouncements too can be seen as part of a political ecosystem where since several years authoritarian tendencies are becoming more pronounced and the quality of public discourse has coarsened to an unacceptable level. When politicians speak in such a vein — and no party is entirely blameless — that disregard for decency and temperance percolates down to their supporters. With social media accessible to all and sundry to make their opinions known, the crudeness is further amplified. In the din, each side can only make itself heard if its words outdo the other, a situation that becomes uglier with every post and every tweet. Given it is the party at the centre, the PTI must set an example by asking its leaders to tone down their rhetoric. It should also admonish those amongst its ranks who appear resistant to the idea of a fair trial in cases of corruption and would rather advocate vigilante justice.

Libya ceasefire

EVER since the 2011 fall of Libyan strongman Muammar Qadhafi in protests fuelled by the Arab Spring, the North African country has not seen stability. In fact, the fate of Libya in many ways mirrors that of Syria, even though Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad continues to cling to power whereas Qadhafi met a gruesome end. In both cases, foreign intervention designed to remove an autocratic ruler has, instead, caused even more chaos and the collapse of the state. In Libya’s case, there were signs of hope last week when the Government of National Accord, the UN-recognised set-up based in the capital Tripoli, announced a ceasefire. However, the truce has swiftly been rejected by the Libyan National Army, an armed group led by warlord Khalifa Haftar that controls large parts of the country’s east. An LNA spokesman on Sunday referred to the ceasefire as a “marketing stunt”.

Unfortunately, similar to the Syrian situation, the differences between Libyan groups and tribes have been exacerbated by external meddling. In Libya’s case, the GNA is supported by Turkey and Qatar, while the rebel LNA has the support of Egypt, Russia and the UAE. Needless to say, these external players are using Libya as a battlefield to settle scores, while the Libyan factions are amenable to receiving arms, funds and fighters from foreign backers. This, as in Syria where

the Western-Arab states joined forces to try and oust Mr Assad, who is backed by Iran and Russia, has been a recipe for disaster. It illustrates the fallacy of nation-building programmes and the so-called responsibility to protect, which was invoked by the West in both Syria and Libya. Qadhafi, much like the Syrian leader, was no model democrat. In fact he was a ruthless dictator who brooked no dissent. Yet his forced removal by Nato has arguably created more problems for ordinary Libyans. Now, instead of creating more chaos, all foreign forces must work to make the ceasefire in Libya succeed, so that the once functional state can be rebuilt.

Afghan Taliban visit

THE news that the Taliban delegation visiting Islamabad has had productive discussions with the Pakistani side led by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has raised expectations of an early start to the intra-Afghan dialogue.

In fact, speaking to the media after the talks, Mr Qureshi said he was hopeful that the intra-Afghan talks would start soon and expressed optimism for progress in the near future despite problems and the presence of spoilers. He was assisted in the talks by DG ISI Lt-Gen Faiz Hameed while the Afghan Taliban were led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, director of the Taliban's Doha-based political office.

The intra-Afghan talks are facing some delays on the issue of release of prisoners. While both sides had agreed to the release, last-minute hitches are causing concern. A delay increases the chances of mishaps and incidents of violence flaring up and damaging the delicate situation.

President Donald Trump has announced a major drawdown of US troops in Afghanistan before the November US presidential elections which means the timeline for talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban is a tight one.

Pakistan has played a constructive role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table and Washington has acknowledged this role. The foreign minister's optimism suggests sufficient headway has been made in the Islamabad talks in terms of the Taliban's approach to finding a way out of the prisoner release impasse.

The key challenge now is to bring the two Afghan sides together to start negotiating a power-sharing agreement. This will be a long, arduous process with

obstacles that may threaten talks at any point. Therefore, it would be important for both sides to ensure that violence does not break out and derail talks. At the same time, major stakeholders such as Pakistan and the US will need to keep engaged at every stage of these negotiations in order to ensure hurdles are crossed without prospects of the process breaking down.

After Afghanistan, no other country has a bigger stake in peace in the war-torn country than Pakistan. It goes to the credit of the Pakistani leadership that it has steered the Taliban to the negotiating table and managed a terse relationship with the Kabul government well. Afghanistan now has a genuine shot at a peaceful settlement of the decades-long conflict.

Islamabad and Washington should now lean on both sides to fulfil the obligations agreed upon earlier. The last batch of prisoners need to be released and dates for talks firmed up. The longer this uncertain situation prevails, the greater the chance of a spoiler event happening.

It is hoped that some firm commitment would have been made by the Taliban in their talks at the Foreign Office and that this momentum would be matched by President Ashraf Ghani. The Trump administration needs to prod Kabul to fulfil its commitments as soon as possible.

Africa's polio win

IN a major breakthrough, following a three-decade-long campaign, the African continent has been declared free of the wild poliovirus. From thousands of children annually falling prey to the virus — which causes muscle weakness and paralysis — to no new cases in the past four years, there is reason for global health experts to celebrate this piece of good news. While other African nations had long stamped out the wild poliovirus, Nigeria struggled to eliminate it, with its northern region ensnared in a long battle against Boko Haram militants, making it perilous for health workers to reach all children in the country. However, after four new cases were reported in the north-eastern state of Borno in 2016, the government and international agencies were jolted into action, while the military was recruited to accompany health workers carrying out mass immunisation programmes aided by the latest technologies. But even as the continent — and indeed, the world — celebrates this significant victory, there is a sense of

caution, given that there has been an upsurge in the number of vaccine-derived poliovirus cases in the continent.

Meanwhile, here at home, Pakistan continues to struggle to eliminate the wild strain of the virus, and has also had to contend with a resurgence of the vaccine-derived poliovirus, previously thought to have been eliminated from the country several years ago. Now that Nigeria has successfully defeated the wild poliovirus, only two countries remain that are yet to celebrate a similar victory: Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even as 32m children under the age of five years have been vaccinated in the latest immunisation drive in the country, in two separate incidents, anti-polio teams were attacked, and women health workers harassed. There is no doubt that the challenges of the war against polio are close to insurmountable, ranging from anti-vaccine hoaxes, and religious extremism, to basic hygiene and sanitation issues. But other countries that have faced similar issues still managed to eliminate the disease from within their borders. And yet, despite all our efforts, it seems as if we cannot progress on this one issue. Just this month, a 14-year-old boy and a two-year-old infant died from the poliovirus in Lahore; a month earlier, a six-month-old boy died in Taunsa Sharif. This year, Pakistan has recorded over 60 new poliovirus cases, a recent victim being a 20-month-old boy in Quetta. Reportedly, like many others, the boy's parents refused to get their child vaccinated.

Monsoon catastrophe

THE disaster that strikes Karachi during the monsoon season is once again on full display. It is a searing indictment of a system of governance that has only worsened over the decades. Rain-related incidents have already claimed at least 30 lives this month, while 10 people died in July. During this season, when main roads and neighbourhoods get flooded, provincial and municipal authorities resort to what they claim are emergency measures. After so many years, no permanent solution to a recurring disaster has been found, and, 'emergency measures' notwithstanding, residents of Karachi and Hyderabad regularly see an increase in urban flooding as well as a number of people dying from electrocution. In this month alone, the amount of rainfall in Karachi in August has been the highest since 1931, according to the Sindh government.

Earlier in the month, the National Disaster Management Authority, on the prime minister's orders, had cleaned some of the storm-water drains in the city to prevent flooding. However, decades of irregularities and cutting corners in civic matters, has resulted in a situation where even a moderate amount of rainfall can end up paralysing life in the megapolis. Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has declared a rain emergency in the province, cancelling the leaves of government employees, but how will these hapless people be of any help if they cannot reach their offices because the main roads and their neighbourhoods are flooded? The emergency measures may provide some short-term relief, but they are not going to resolve the deep-rooted issues that make Karachi vulnerable to damage in the first place. While one hopes that the NDMA-led efforts prevent the situation from worsening, the politicians, mainly belonging to the PPP, PTI and MQM, must keep the interests of citizens above their petty blame games. They need to work towards a consensus to ensure that empowered local government institutions are in place, and to agree on a plan to revamp the infrastructure so that flooding is prevented.

Acid attack

ON Sunday, two women in Karachi became victims of yet another horrific acid attack. Reportedly, a man and woman threw the substance on them over a property dispute. They were rushed to Civil Hospital's Burns Ward. Prior to this, in July, a madressah teacher was arrested for sexually assaulting and throwing acid on children in Rahim Yar Khan. Such brutal and premeditated acts of violence are all too common in South Asian countries, and while their occurrence — at least the cases that come to light — has decreased in Pakistan, perhaps due to improved legislation and relentless advocacy work, there are still far too many such incidents. Revenge and control are common underlying themes behind such attacks, with rejected suitors and abusers using acid as their weapon of choice to 'punish' their victims, disfiguring and psychologically scarring them for life. Other reasons include land disputes, personal or political vendettas, and warped notions of 'honour'.

It takes years for survivors to piece their lives together, and some never do. Who can forget the tragic short life of Fakhra Younus? In her own words, her estranged husband, former MPA Bilal Khar, threw acid on her face, severely disfiguring her and blinding her in one eye. After 12 painful years and 39

surgeries, Fakhra took her own life by jumping from the balcony of her sixth-floor apartment in Italy. She left behind a suicide note, blaming “the silence of law” and “the insensitivity of rulers” for her death. Just one year before Fakhra’s death, the National Assembly had passed the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill, 2011, which said that offenders would have to face a minimum of 14 years to maximum life imprisonment, along with a fine of Rs1m. Then, in 2018, the National Assembly unanimously passed the Acid and Burn Crime Bill, 2017, which offers free medical treatment and rehabilitation for survivors, but it has yet to become law. Politicians and law enforcement should not forget about this crime.

Reopening tourism

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan’s interest in promoting tourism in the country has culminated in the formation of the National Coordination Committee for Tourism, which is going to be run by Special Assistant Zulfikar Bukhari as its convener. Mr Bukhari will be briefing Mr Khan every fortnight, which shows the high priority the prime minister attaches to this sector. The committee will implement a national tourism strategy. The ultimate long-term economic benefit of setting up a robust tourism industry is to generate revenue and jobs — an objective that has been greeted with some scepticism as resources are hard to come by and so far little has been done to tap the industry’s potential. But there is no shortage of enthusiasm either. Experts have concurred with official projections regarding the country’s treasures by coming up with their own positive assessments. There is a certain vibrancy to Pakistanis’ urge to travel within the country. The increasing number of domestic tourists who set out on pleasure trips to famous holiday destinations, especially in the north and northwest of the country during summer, testifies to this. In fact, some spots are chock-a-block with people during summer, leading to calls for greater regulation and the promotion of less-crowded resorts. More systematic, reassuring handling of operations would boost tourist confidence and lift the industry as a whole. Once the infrastructure is created, some bold decision-making would be required to woo the average foreign tourist to Pakistan.

Having said that, there are some issues that need urgent attention. In the recent past, the government came under attack for doing away with the staff and structure of the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation. The need to create

an alternative is an immense challenge. Then there are health issues. Pakistan is certainly fortunate in having been less affected by the coronavirus as compared to other countries. But the health emergency is certainly not over. For instance, the Mansehra district administration recently sealed hotels after several staff members tested positive for the virus. They were reopened later after the premises was disinfected, but overall, popular vacation spots have seen a rise in Covid-19 cases, with tourists being blamed for not observing SOPs. This is a point of concern as holiday destinations are vulnerable to the virus. What is positive is the fact that thousands are waiting to get away from their dreary daily drill. After the pandemic, they should be facilitated in every way possible.

IHC ruling

THE preamble to the Constitution says: “The state shall exercise its powers and authority through the chosen representatives of the people.” The Islamabad High Court underscored this principle of democracy in unambiguous terms on Wednesday while disposing of the petition challenging the appointment of Shahzad Akbar as the prime minister’s adviser on accountability and interior. Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah observed that the country’s chief executive has the prerogative of appointing whomever he deems appropriate to advise him, and of tendering advice to the president for individuals to be appointed as his advisers. However, the court also declared that unelected advisers and special assistants to the prime minister cannot exercise executive or administrative powers in the functioning of the government; they cannot even speak on the government’s behalf. Moreover, said Justice Minallah, only elected representatives have the privilege of running the ministries.

At present, the prime minister has five advisers — the maximum constitutionally allowed — with the powers and status of federal ministers. He also has 14 special assistants, a role the Constitution does not even recognise; despite this, several special assistants have been accorded federal minister status. Much angst has been simmering within the ranks of elected PTI ministers who find themselves sidelined while non-elected advisers and special assistants assume decision-making roles in their ministries. The resentment has surfaced several times, with Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan and Federal Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry among those who have given voice to it.

It is unfortunate the court has had to point out that which should have been very clear to a government that draws its legitimacy from the power of the people's vote. There is a perception, not wholly unfounded, that Prime Minister Imran Khan is running the government largely with the help of individuals who have been handpicked by him, rather than chosen by the electorate — a parallel cabinet of sorts. While the prime minister can, indeed should, select the most capable individuals to help him run the affairs of the state — the PPP and PML-N too had advisers who would sit in cabinet meetings and attend parliament — his discretion to do so is not unfettered. Rules of Business 1973 make it clear that having the status of federal minister does not confer executive authority; at most, it is for protocol purposes. Advisers and special assistants should play a low-key, behind-the-scenes role; their link should be to the prime minister alone, not to the bureaucracy or the public. Certainly, there are times when a minister needs specialised advice where his or her portfolio is concerned; it may invite less controversy to have experts attached to the ministry itself. Meanwhile, for the next elections, perhaps the PTI could consider putting up candidates who could bring their expertise to the cabinet through the electorate instead of through the back door.

Orphan city

IT seemed as though all the sins of omission and commission inflicted on Karachi over several decades came together in one terrible, catastrophic day. Pakistan's largest city and its financial hub was on Thursday battered by record-breaking rains. At least 19 people were killed in rain-related incidents, bringing the death toll to 30 during three days of torrential downpour. Several were electrocuted, some drowned in the rising waters. Millions across the city, even in the upscale DHA areas managed by the Clifton Cantonment Board, saw their homes and businesses flooded. There was no electricity; even mobile phone services were disrupted. Karachi was in effect rendered non-functional, with its residents largely left to fend for themselves.

Undoubtedly this has been an unprecedented monsoon in Karachi: at around 485mm, the rainfall in August this year has shattered an 89-year record. It is, however, equally true that the city drowned under the weight of the criminal negligence and bottomless greed that have characterised its governance for many years now. All those ruling Karachi now and in the past, as well as various

other influential stakeholders, are to blame for its descent into one of the world's most unlivable cities. The city mayor, whose tenure ended yesterday, belonged to the MQM, and the PTI in 2018 emerged as the largest party in Karachi. Strident (and correctly so) about the merits of devolution when it feels threatened by what it perceives as the centre's interference, the Sindh government nevertheless refuses to devolve powers to the local level. In fact, through a legislative change in 2013, it eviscerated the very concept of third-tier governance. Its indifference to Karachi's suffering, for the sake of preserving its political predominance and its control over the massive funds that would otherwise go towards local government, is reprehensible in the extreme. Meanwhile, the PPP's top bosses are minting billions through their stakes in high-rise construction projects of dubious provenance all over the metropolis, recklessly straining its already crumbling infrastructure.

The MQM's depredations are not far behind. Even when it ran a working local government in Karachi, many among its leadership looked out first and foremost for themselves. The party perfected the practice of 'china-cutting' whereby plots were sliced off from public parks and other amenities and sold for huge profits. No attention was given to urban planning, upgrading the drainage system or developing a sustainable solid waste disposal system. Instead, natural storm-water nullahs have been used to dump solid waste; or else encroached upon, often with the collusion of those in authority. In their obscene quest for self-enrichment, the political parties, and other players in the highest echelons of power have treated Karachi as their personal fiefdom, to loot and plunder at will, rather than a city meant to be the gateway to a progressive, prosperous Pakistan. This must end now: enough is enough.

Funds for LGs

IN a generous move, Punjab's ruling set-up has 'in principle' decided to do a huge favour to local governments, which have been lying suspended in the province, and allow them to utilise funds that had been already allocated and transferred to them. During a visit to Faisalabad the other day, Chief Minister Usman Buzdar broke the news about 'unfreezing' LGs' development funds. As these LGs are hardly among those who can choose what they want, the move must be welcomed. The delivery of funds may help them finance some of their stalled, small schemes aimed at providing basic amenities such as sanitation and

potable water to citizens. In some lucky cases, with a little bit of extra optimism, it can be presumed that a few roads may be repaired and crumbling infrastructure patched up here and there. This would be no small transformation when we consider that the same provincial government had forbidden the same LGs from using their development funds last year. These elected local institutions, dominated as they were by the opposition PML-N, were dissolved midway through their tenure last year to pave the way for the replacement of the Punjab Local Government Act, 2013, with a new law. One reason to ‘freeze’ the LGs’ development funds was to prevent the possible misuse of public money by unelected administrators during this transition period.

The ruling PTI had promised to organise new polls within one year of the premature termination of the elected LGs’ tenure. But it is yet to deliver on its commitment in spite of the passage of the new Punjab Local Government Act, 2019, last November. The Covid-19 crisis is cited as the reason for delay but a permanent deterrent in the way of LG polls is the aversion of the upper elected tiers to share power with the grassroots representatives. Devolution of powers to the lowest units is critical to a strong democratic dispensation. This unfreezing of funds for LGs now in an effort to revitalise the economy can turn into a lesson in governance only if the rulers pay heed to the basic principles of popular rule. The change of heart has come as the Buzdar government tries to stimulate stalled economic activities through public-sector development investment. The truth is that ultimately rulers must reach out to the grassroots to reach the people. The re-entry and temporary restoration of LG functionaries at this critical moment best illustrates this point.

Christchurch conclusion

ON Thursday, the white supremacist who killed 51 people and injured dozens more in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Over the three days prior, scores of emotionally charged victim impact statements were heard in court. Delivering the first such and highest prison sentence in the country’s history, the judge said that such punishment was reserved for only the “very worst murders”. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said that it meant the convicted killer would have “no notoriety, no platform ... Today I hope is the last where we have any cause to hear or utter the name of the terrorist”. Thus concluded the legal proceedings of an attack that

irrevocably altered not only the lives of the survivors and victims' families, but also the nation itself.

The solidarity New Zealanders extended one another in the wake of tragedy, as well as the collective shunning of any attempt to rationalise the killer's deeds — as is symptomatic of Western media coverage when the perpetrator is white — is a template for how countries should respond to Islamophobia and other forms of racism. Beyond mere calls for tolerance of diversity, Kiwis have emphatically upheld the rights of their fellow Muslims. It was the victims, not the attacker, who were foregrounded in news coverage, public policy responses and trial proceedings. There are lessons for non-Western, security-centric countries to draw from too. Justice — centred not on the state but on people — was seen to be done, in which killers were not glorified, affectees were heard, truth was aired, and traumas to the national psyche given a chance to heal. Contrast this with the manner in which trials and inquiry commissions into public tragedies, from terrorist attacks to plane crashes, are conducted elsewhere — away from the public gaze, with the full facts rarely submitted to the public record. Not only does this erode trust in institutions, it also denies survivors and victims' families answers — and closure.

PTA's arbitrary moves

IN yet another vaguely worded statement, it emerged that the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has asked video-sharing platform YouTube to immediately block content that is “vulgar, indecent and immoral” or that which falls under the ambit of hate speech. The authority has requested that content under these categories be blocked for users in Pakistan “to prevent repugnant discord”. This new statement on the government's objection to YouTube content is reminiscent of the warning issued to the Chinese short video-sharing platform TikTok in July, when the PTA ordered it to filter “obscene” content. It also serves as a warning for YouTube users for whom the memory of the 2012 YouTube ban, which lasted three years, is still fresh.

Time and again, the PTA raises the issue of alleged obscene or vulgar content, yet fails to make details of such content public. What exactly is this content and what laws are being violated? Against this backdrop of secrecy, it is understandable that rights activists are concerned that these moves may be

stealthy attempts at censorship and muzzling of free expression. As the space for dissent and criticism shrinks in Pakistan — as evidenced by successive governments passing legislation such as the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, and now eyeing the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020 — it is important for both the PTA and tech companies to be transparent about their communication and dealings. In countries where citizens are not well-versed in digital rights and where authoritarian governments take advantage of this fact, platforms like YouTube must share information and be accountable to the users that generate profits for them. Their annual reports ought to transparently tell users what is being restricted and why, instead of simply aggregating a set of numbers to show how many of these requests were made. Citizens have a right to know what the PTA is asking YouTube to remove and, if the tech platform is complying with government requests, users must know the reasons behind its actions.

Port operations

THE recent torrential rains and unprecedented urban flooding in Karachi have adversely disturbed port operations, causing problems for Pakistan's international trade. Activity at the city's two ports has either slowed down or has been suspended because of heavy monsoon showers over the last several days, creating challenges for safe operations and bringing cargo/shipping handling to a halt. Neither port officials nor labour could reach the ports after the city went under water, leading to delays in the provision of services such as cargo scanning, deliveries and cargo loading. Since there has been very limited activity, consignments have piled up, causing congestion. Exporters have been facing shipment delays for the last 10 days even before the city was submerged under rainwater and the situation has spawned concerns that the country may not be able to maintain the export growth momentum seen in the last couple of months after the government reopened the economy amid declining Covid-19 infections. The gravity of the situation and its potential impact on the nation's foreign trade was also acknowledged by the adviser on commerce Abdul Razzak Dawood when he tweeted, that "it appears that because of heavy rains, particularly in Karachi, our export consignments are being delayed and, hence, exports may be affected in August". At the same time, he advised exporters to bring any difficulties they faced to the notice of the commerce ministry.

At a time when coronavirus restrictions are being relaxed in Europe and North America, and buyers of Pakistani manufactured goods, especially of value-added textiles, are replenishing their depleted inventories, this state of affairs will deal a blow to efforts aimed at reviving the economy. Successive governments have failed to invest in improving urban infrastructure and port operations. It is rightly pointed out by business leaders from Karachi that the rain was not the real issue — the deluge merely exposed the crumbling infrastructure that has disabled efforts to increase exports. Infrastructure and logistics bottlenecks are believed by exporters to be a major reason behind the poor export performance of the country and have increased the cost of doing business in recent years.

According to the Logistics Performance Index, which is an interactive benchmarking tool created to help countries identify the challenges and opportunities in their performance on trade logistics and how they can improve, Pakistan ranked 125th among 160 nations in 2018. In other words, the logistics-friendly profile for Pakistan is nothing to talk about. Indeed, both the government and State Bank have implemented numerous measures to revive the stalled economy and enhance manufactured goods exports by mitigating the negative effects of the Covid-19 crisis on industry. However, such efforts will pay off only partially unless we start to invest heavily in our trade and urban infrastructure to produce exportable surplus and efficiently ship it to buyers abroad.

Polio storm

THE global monitoring body for polio has voiced serious reservations regarding the prospects for eradicating the crippling disease in Pakistan. In its latest report, the Independent Monitoring Board has stated in no uncertain terms that cases of both wild and vaccine-derived poliovirus are about to rise sharply. The report raises concerns about the strategic and technical capabilities of the Pakistan Polio Programme while warning that the number of cases could be in the hundreds if mass vaccination drives do not resume soon. At a time when Africa has been declared polio-free, the IMB report contains damning revelations about Pakistan's blundering response to eradicating this disease. In its no-holds-barred assessment, the document states: "There is every possibility that Pakistan will be the last place on Earth to harbour this terrible disease."

At least 61 cases of wild poliovirus surfaced in the country until July 31, 2020; in the corresponding period last year, the number was 56. Moreover, in 2018 and 2017, the total number of polio cases was 12 and eight respectively. The IMB report pinpoints criminal lapses in the authorities' management of the Polio Programme, while raising alarm that an outbreak of vaccine-derived polio is on the horizon. It highlights the transference of wild poliovirus from its core reservoirs of Karachi and Quetta to the southern parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Lahore, a situation exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Besides calling out the federal government for setting up the National Strategic Advisory Group in November 2019 and then seemingly forgetting about it, the report also makes special mention of the Sindh government for not being able to appoint a single qualified medical officer in the eight super-high-risk union councils of Karachi. In Balochistan, the movement of people across the Pak-Afghan border renders the situation even more complex. The report states that vaccination of large numbers of children who traverse the border daily is way below par, risking transfer of the virus between the world's two remaining polio-endemic countries. It stresses the need for a "transformational change" in anti-polio efforts and greater collaboration with Afghan authorities to curb the spread of the disease. Our leadership would also do well to seek Nigeria's advice; the latter country has been able to win the battle against polio despite also being hit by militancy. There is no time for dilly-dallying; all caveats and excuses must be set aside to achieve the task ahead.