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EDITORIALS

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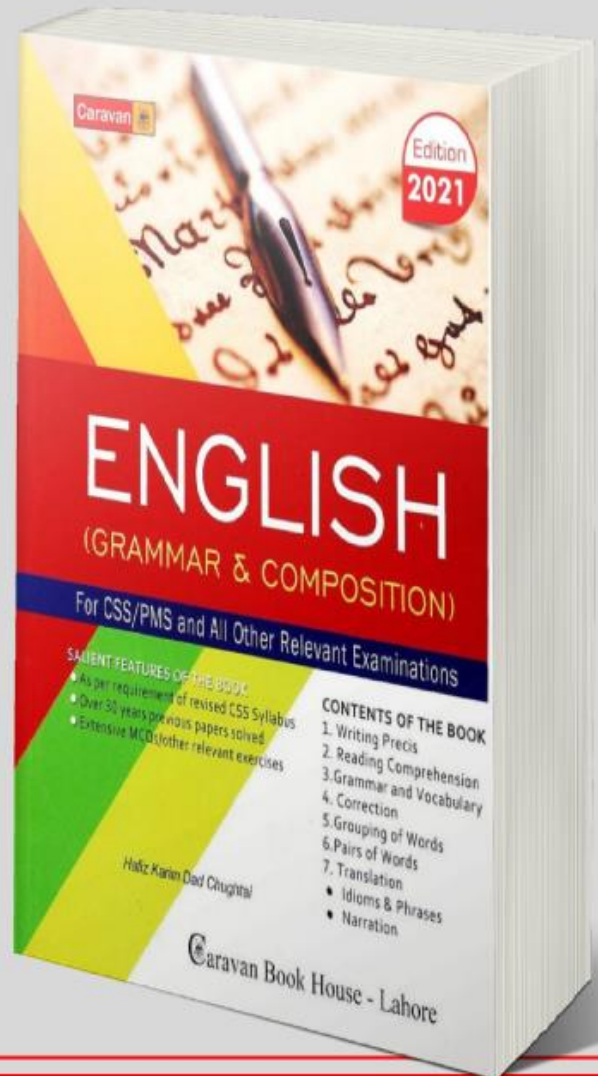
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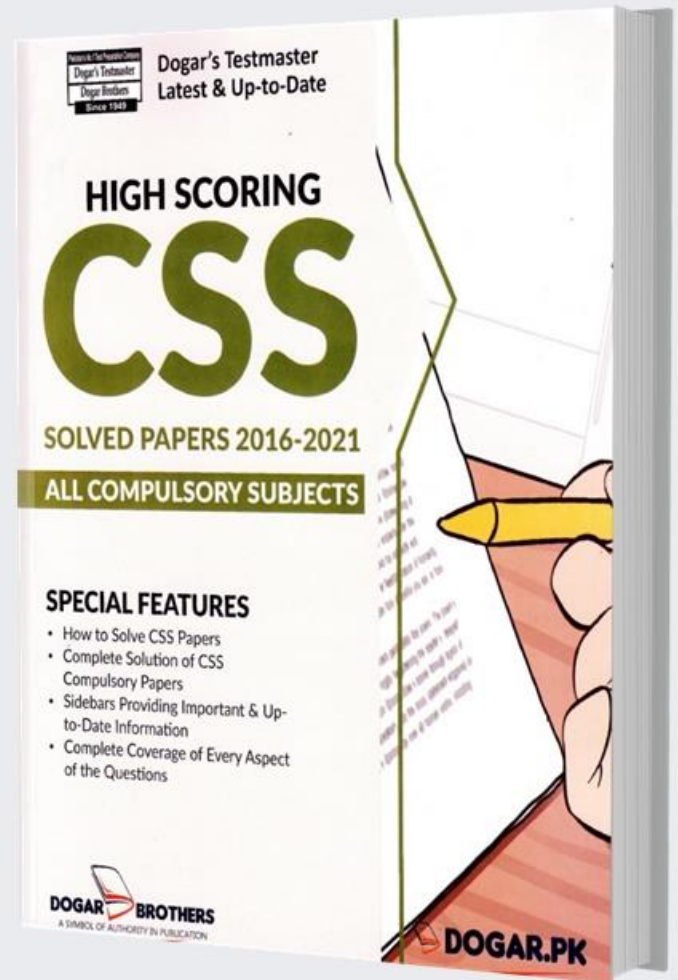
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No Olympic glory

FOR about 30 minutes at the Tokyo Olympics weightlifting competition last week, Talha Talib remained in the podium places, on the brink of ending Pakistan's 29-year drought for a Games medal and an even longer wait for one in an individual sport. It was in Seoul 1988 when boxer Hussain Shah won only the country's second medal in an individual sport when he picked up the bronze, following wrestler Mohammad Bashir's bronze in 1960. Talha seemed poised to become the third but his eventual fifth-place finish started a debate, one that arises each time the Olympics come around and dies down soon after: what will it take for Pakistan to be successful at the Olympics? It leads to questions about the government's role, especially that of the Pakistan Sports Board. It leads to questions about the role of the Pakistan Olympic Association. After Talha's performance, a blame game ensued between the POA and PSB. The former claimed its job is to promote the Olympic charter in Pakistan while it's the latter's job to fund and develop sport. The PSB's decision to return Rs440m of unspent funds to the government at the end of this financial year especially came under fire.

Talha's performance was a bright spot at a so far dismal Olympics for Pakistan. And it came in the tenure of a government led by a former sportsman. If sports in the country aren't reformed during Prime Minister Imran Khan's term, one wonders if it will happen at all. The government's role in sports development needs to be reassessed. The various sports federations which form the POA need to be streamlined; reforms need to be brought in so that funding can be accessed without the government worrying whether it will actually reach the athletes. It is ironic that Talha was at the Olympics without his coach and was instead accompanied by the weightlifting federation president. India's Olympic Association has moved towards financial independence from the government and has brought in new revenue streams. It has worked on securing greater funding from the International Olympic Committee's solidarity plan to develop athletes, coaches and teams. It even makes public its audit; something neither the POA nor the sports federations here do. Pakistan's Olympic revival will only happen if professionals are brought in to run sports federations, including the POA and PSB, instead of retired personnel from the army and other institutions as well as politicians who have a tendency to overstay their welcome.

Necessary lockdown

AS the countrywide positivity ratio of Covid-19 infections crossed 8pc, Sindh imposed a nine-day lockdown effective from Saturday. The decision came as nearly 5,000 new coronavirus cases were recorded across the country on July 30, and as oxygen beds and Covid-19 units in Karachi's hospitals began to fill up.

The province's chief minister said the lockdown from July 31 to Aug 8 was a 'loose lockdown' and was different from the one last year. Export-related industries, bakeries and essential services remain open though markets and government offices are closed. Restaurants are restricted to takeaways only, and exams scheduled in this period have been postponed. The government advisory is that residents should not leave home unless it is for the purpose of vaccination.

The closure of markets and restriction on business activities will bring hardship to daily wage earners and inconvenience business. But, as officials in the Sindh government have said, it is absolutely necessary to provide breathing space to public-sector hospitals that are feeling immense pressure from an uptick in Covid-19-related hospitalisations. It is imperative that the spread of infections in the province is kept under control, and the curve flattened. With Muharram around the corner and large processions expected in major cities, failure to act from now can have terrible consequences.

A lockdown is far from an ideal situation, but it appears that the Sindh government's decision is rooted in epidemiology. The Delta variant is rapidly spreading across the country. On average, one patient transmits the virus to five persons. In some districts of Sindh, the Delta detection ratio has reached 33pc — proof of how exponentially this variant spreads and what it can mean for the country's limited healthcare infrastructure. If the Sindh government does not manage to slow down the spread now, the coming weeks will see a collapse of hospitals.

As the provinces prepare for another wave of coronavirus infections, it is imperative for both the federal and provincial government to ramp up vaccinations. Thus far, 6.3m citizens have been fully vaccinated, and though the government is making an effort to increase the daily jabs, Pakistan's target of vaccinating 70m adults will not be easy.

As the gap between the vaccinated and unvaccinated is slowly reduced, the authorities must be vigilant about disease spread and enforce strict SOPs. It is a shame that officials failed to restrict the movement of infected international passengers in Karachi, with some escaping or being allowed to leave quarantine despite having Covid-19. Health officials at designated quarantine hospitals say passengers over the last three months who tested positive somehow hoodwinked the authorities. What is worse is that 14 Delta-infected passengers were ordered to be released after calls from high-ups. Negligence and VIP culture contributed to the spread of the Delta variant in Karachi, and the resultant lockdown is the high price that citizens have to pay.

Preventable E-11 flooding

THE flooding on Wednesday in Islamabad's E-11/2 sector is deserving of the shock it has spawned. The flouting of urban-planning by-laws, avarice and mismanagement by the authorities are nothing new. Urban flooding has in the past caused havoc in many cities. But in Islamabad, the capital that was established from scratch and is much touted as being developed according to a formal, long-term master plan? It is apparent that this ideal exists only on paper. And even here, E-11 is in a class of its own. It seems that in the 1960 CDA Ordinance, then president Ayub Khan exempted this sector from the authority's oversight because of the presence of the Golra Sharif shrine. In 2007-08, the authority made by-laws for high-rise buildings here, but these were not stringently implemented. Today, we have the tragedy of a woman and her son having drowned in the basement of their home in the Medical Cooperative Housing Society, while countless others have suffered material damage.

Subsequent to the disaster, satellite images of the area taken in 2002 and 2008, were compared with those from 2010-12. They establish that the storm-water drain entering the area was straightened and a bottleneck apparently created by the housing authority, which carved out residential and commercial plots and roads, while turning a blind eye to encroachments. Nearly a decade ago, the housing society appears to have had the layout plan approved by the CDA but went ahead with plot sales and construction without obtaining the requisite no-objection certificate. Later, the CDA cancelled the plan's approval but by then, it was too late. Now, the government has promised remedial action; perhaps natural water courses will be restored and new developments will, by some miracle, be closely

watched so that the by-laws are not flouted. City managers also decided to send a summary to the prime minister to revoke the 1960 exemption for E-11. But what of those who have lost so much and stand to lose more? Helpless citizens can only hope.

Row over NCSW

SOME matters are simply too important to play politics on. Protection of women's rights is one of them. Unfortunately, the long overdue appointment of the chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women has run into an ugly, partisan controversy. Evidence of bias arose in the initial shortlisting process itself, but it came to a head two weeks ago during the in camera meeting of the parliamentary committee to appoint the head of the NCSW, a post that had been lying vacant for two years. Opposition nominee Fauzia Waqar polled six votes against five bagged by the PTI candidate Nilofar Bakhtiar. At that point, committee chairperson, the PTI's Falak Naz, announced she was using her casting vote whereby both candidates ended up with equal votes. Legislators from the opposition accused her of violating the rules which stipulate that the casting vote is used only when both candidates have polled an equal number of votes. Last week, the government nevertheless notified Ms Bakhtiar as the new NCSW chairperson. The PPP denounced the move in the strongest terms and rejected the appointment as violating parliamentary rules and procedures and therefore illegal. PPP MNA Nafisa Shah asked the government to immediately withdraw the notification. The matter may now land up in court.

The post of chairperson NCSW has been lying vacant for two years. That gives an indication as to the importance the government accords a statutory body mandated to review laws and policies and monitor the implementation of legislation pertaining to women's protection, equality and empowerment. The NCSW also plays a vital role in ensuring that the government meets its international commitments; it can even advocate for foreign policy to be shaped in a way to take into account the impact on women in Pakistan. The spate of horrific acts of gender-based violence that have occurred in this country in the last few weeks alone is enough to underscore why the NCSW must be made fully functional. An effective NCSW is vital for spearheading efforts to bring about improvement in women protection laws, and monitoring the way crimes against women are investigated and

prosecuted. In fact, it can even undertake an investigation itself if not satisfied with the police report.

The Commission was established in 2000 as a landmark development in the history of women's rights in the country. However, after the initial few years during which it led the way in bringing about several pro-women laws, it has often been handicapped by bureaucratic interference, and insufficient, inconsistent funding, not to mention delays in appointment of members and chairpersons. Enough is enough. Parliament must demonstrate the political will to review the law under which the NCSW was established and ensure that the fully empowered and autonomous Commission that was promised comes into existence. The women of Pakistan deserve nothing less.

Mismanaging LNG

PAKISTAN'S purchase of expensive LNG cargoes for the September-October delivery in less than three weeks after cancelling cheaper deals underlines the government sector's limited capacity to predict markets. At a just under-average rate of \$15.5 per mmBtu, it is the most expensive spot purchase of gas by the country since the previous government started importing LNG to fill the growing supply gap in 2015. Ironically, the authorities had rejected the bids ranging between \$13mmBtu and \$16mmBtu recently when the global LNG market began increasing on growing supply disruptions. Surprisingly, the bids priced between \$13.79mmBtu and \$13.99mmBtu from Qatar were also called off in the hope of getting lower offers later despite clear signs of surging global demand. The decision was apparently based on the reading of the European markets where plummeting gas prices had caused the rates in Asian markets to drop. But not for long.

The authorities have defended the spot purchases of gas at higher rates, terming it the lesser evil. "Pakistan LNG Ltd ... was forced to accept four LNG 'spot' tenders at \$15.4 per mmBtu for September 2021; otherwise, the replacement fuel (furnace oil), which is even more expensive, would have resulted in September power prices higher by at least 20pc," said the Petroleum Division. But the argument that "no one, without a crystal ball, can perfectly time or beat an international commodity market" is weak. While it is correct that there is no perfect way of predicting the markets, it is equally true that the private sector is much better

equipped to anticipate the market direction. Besides, the private sector also has the capacity to take quick decisions based on its reading of market dynamics. Impeded by regulations, governments do not have such a facility. It is not the first time the authorities have made a mess, putting an additional burden on consumers. Last summer, they couldn't book cheaper, advance cargoes when prices were down, and paid much higher costs during winter when demand was at its peak. The fact is that the LNG business is hugely mismanaged by the bureaucracy. State agencies don't have the experience or capacity to handle it, causing people to suffer. The sooner the government removes the impediments blocking the private sector's involvement in the LNG market the better it will be for consumers and the national exchequer. The private sector will bring gas at cheaper rates without causing financial risk to the government.

Against their will

THE case of Reena Meghwar has highlighted yet again the reprehensible practice of forced conversions in the country.

The case emerged last week when a local court in Badin, Sindh, allowed the victim to leave her 'husband' and reunite with her family. This was Reena's third appearance in court since February 2021. She retracted her earlier two statements about converting to Islam and wanting to live with her 'husband', saying that her previous stance was on account of the threat to her family. The court not only ordered her release but also instructed the police to register new cases against her 'husband'.

Unfortunately, Reena's ordeal is not uncommon. Her case is nevertheless significant because a local court demonstrated its writ without bowing to influential quarters that are often found supporting the perpetrators. Moreover, in a large number of such cases, the physical and emotional duress of the victims remains in the background, and does not become part of the court record.

A similar case occurred last year when a 13-year-old Christian girl from Karachi was allowed to live with her so-called husband by the Sindh High Court on the basis of spurious documents, and the girl's statement that she was 18 years of age and had married of her own free will. The high court too later reversed its decision and put the teenager in protective custody when new evidence emerged.

Estimates indicate that some 1,000 girls from minority communities mostly in Sindh are forcibly converted to Islam every year in the country. Most of them are also under the legal marriageable age, yet the authorities are hesitant to take action as the perpetrators often have connections in high circles. Implementation of child marriage laws must be ensured to curtail at least one aspect of forced conversions. It is also time for the Sindh Assembly to push back against regressive elements who had taken objection to a bill to deter forced conversions and succeeded in stopping its passage.

Changing GB's status

THE government's plans to accord a provisional provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan are progressing steadily and the law ministry has finalised the proposed legislation. As reported in this paper, the proposed law that has already been submitted to Prime Minister Imran Khan, will not affect Pakistan's position on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir as per the UN resolutions. The provisional status is meant to signify that the final status of GB will be determined according to the requirements of the UN resolutions. The draft of this constitutional amendment bill proposes a provincial assembly for GB as well as representation of people from GB in parliament in Islamabad. It also proposes that the Chief Court of Gilgit-Baltistan may be abolished and replaced with a high court, while the Supreme Appellate Court be either abolished or re-established like the Supreme Court of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. If it is abolished then the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court of Pakistan may be extended to GB. The Election Commission of Gilgit-Baltistan will also be merged with the Election Commission of Pakistan and its chairman will be made a member of the ECP if this constitutional amendment is adopted.

This is a step in the right direction. The people of GB have argued for a provisional provincial status for many years and in March this year the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly had passed a unanimous decision demanding such a status. Governments in Pakistan have remained reluctant to give this status for fear that such a step may have adverse repercussions for Pakistan's long-standing and principled position on the Kashmir issue. However, it has now become clear that the wishes of the people of GB must be respected and they be given greater representation and rights to govern themselves. The strategic area has gained more importance with the establishing of CPEC and there is a greater need than ever to integrate it further into the mainstream.

Last year, all political parties were reported to have agreed to the provisional provincial status after the GB elections. The proposed law has been discussed with relevant people in GB as well as AJK. The government should once again take the opposition into confidence about this major move so that the amendment can be passed unanimously. This issue should be above partisan politics and all political stakeholders should take ownership of it. However, every care must be taken to ensure that the text of the amendment is legally watertight and does not in any way dilute Pakistan's position on Kashmir. It may therefore be prudent to have the law vetted by international legal experts as well as diplomats who will be required to defend it at foreign forums if a challenge does arise. The amendment should also be debated thoroughly in parliament and at all public forums before it is put to vote and adopted.

Taliban assault

AS confusion clouds the future of Afghanistan with the Taliban on the rampage across the hapless country, and the government in Kabul unable to put up a solid defence, neighbouring states, including Pakistan, must prepare for the worst where refugees are concerned.

The Afghan Taliban over the last few days have struck Kandahar airport with rockets, while the armed movement is also mounting an assault on the western city of Herat. Indicating the level of frustration in Kabul, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has attributed the fast-deteriorating situation to the "abrupt" US withdrawal. As things fall apart very quickly in Afghanistan, neighbouring countries are bracing themselves for an expected exodus of refugees.

While speaking in Washington recently, National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf reiterated the government's position that safe zones be created within Afghanistan where non-combatants can find shelter, and that the international community must help in this regard. "Pakistan does not have the capacity to take more refugees," he told a presser in the US capital. However, in the midst of these grim developments, peace talks are due in the days ahead in Doha under the umbrella of the 'Extended Troika', which brings together Russia, China, the US and Pakistan, to try and hammer out a solution to the Afghan imbroglio.

It is clear that only a miracle can make the Taliban suspend their assault and agree to talk peace with Kabul. Therefore, the meeting in Doha will be a do-or-die event

where a peaceful resolution to the Afghan conflict is concerned, and hopes should not be too high about chances of its success. If anything, regional states must get assurances that Afghanistan will not be used as a base for transnational terrorist movements in areas controlled by the Taliban. The latter, too, should consider that if they reimpose the old obscurantist order they promoted during their earlier rule, and provide sanctuary to terrorists, regional states and global powers will take action.

As for the refugee question, Pakistan's position is a fair one as this country simply cannot afford a fresh influx. Therefore, Pakistan must work with the UN and other international bodies, as well as those states that have been meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs for the last few decades, to ensure Afghan civilians are safely housed within their own country away from the conflict. Intra-Afghan peace talks should be promoted, but the global community must be ready for the imminent collapse of the Afghan state.

Cancelling Aurat March

THE cancellation of Aurat March Faisalabad is exactly one of those 'isolated incidents' which, when viewed collectively, reveal just how deep-seated patriarchy and misogyny are in our country. According to reports, the Aurat March Faisalabad organisers were denied an NOC on Sunday afternoon to hold their event. The official Twitter handle of Aurat March Faisalabad announced that the march had been put off due to concerns related to security and Muharram. However, human rights activists and Aurat March organisers gave a troubling account of events indicating a different reason. There were reports that the Faisalabad assistant commissioner not only denied them permission to hold the march but went so far as to threaten the student organisers with arrests. One organiser revealed that a day before the march was supposed to be held, a banned sectarian outfit held a press conference slating the women's rights movement. The attitude of the assistant commissioner is extremely problematic, and demonstrates either how intimidated the administration feels when radical elements cause a commotion or the backward mindset that a large number of those running the affairs of the state themselves harbour.

Unfortunately, this is not the first incident where Aurat March organisers have been denied their constitutional right to protest by organs of the state and figures of

authority. Last year, a mural painted to express solidarity with the movement was blackened by vandals supposedly in the presence of the Capital Police, while several participants were injured when people pelted stones at them. In 2019, the KP Assembly had passed a resolution against the annual feature, terming it shameful. Meanwhile, March organisers and participants routinely face threats and abuse online and sometimes also by political leaders. As these incidents and every case of rape, 'honour' killing, domestic violence and discrimination indicate, women of this country need to wrestle for their rights every step of the way. Far from helping them achieve their agency, the state has contributed to strengthening those who want to snatch away their rights.

PML-N's dilemma

IT is no secret that two competing political narratives have been pulling the PML-N and its followers in diametrically opposite directions ever since party leader Nawaz Sharif was forced to step down as prime minister in 2017.

Although the anti-establishment narrative of Nawaz Sharif has dominated PML-N politics, the 'moderates' led by his younger brother and current party president Shahbaz Sharif never lost hope that they would be able to convince him to drop his confrontational stance and reconcile with the security establishment to return to power. Shahbaz Sharif's remarks in a recent TV interview pertaining to a 'grand dialogue' among all 'stakeholders' (presumably the PML-N and the establishment) to steer the country towards calmer waters was a part of the same effort.

There is no doubt that the recent drubbing the PML-N received at the hands of the ruling PTI in AJK and Sialkot has triggered a heated debate within the party on the effectiveness — or lack of it — of the anti-establishment narrative of Nawaz Sharif which has been advanced by his heir apparent Maryam Nawaz. But it doesn't mean that the party is ready to change overnight. The erstwhile prime minister did well to step in to end the confusion created by the party president's interview and nip in the bud any speculation that the PML-N plans to revisit its narrative of civilian supremacy.

Given the country's political history, it's hard for many observers of politics to imagine a party returning to power without backing from the establishment. Therefore, it isn't surprising to see many PML-N legislators and ticket hopefuls blaming the party's anti-establishment stance for its defeat in the recent polls, and

ruling out its chances in the 2023 elections unless it mends fences with the powers that be. But others have questioned this stance and asked if, going by past experience, making compromises is any guarantee that the PML-N will return to power let alone complete a term in office.

The younger Sharif brother's contention that Nawaz Sharif could have been elected prime minister for a fourth term had the party evolved a consensus strategy before the elections has also been challenged by those who believe the party supremo would not have had to exit if the establishment wanted him to return to power. However, this does not mean that an anti-establishment stance and its acceptance in Punjab will bring the PML-N back to power, as it is unthinkable that a political party that has strained relations with those who call the shots can force its way back to the top. The road ahead for the PML-N is going to be long and bumpy no matter which narrative it follows. If supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law are what the party genuinely wants, then it must prepare itself for further pitfalls as it struggles to uphold democratic principles.

Attacks on cops

AMIDST cautious optimism that Pakistan may be finally beginning to achieve success in bringing the number of polio cases down, there has been a spate of disheartening news on the polio vaccination front. Specifically, it pertains to the safety of those in charge of polio vaccinators' security. On Monday, a young policeman on polio duty was martyred in Kulachi, district Dera Ismail Khan, KP. The foot constable, Dilawar Khan, was attacked by unknown men, who then managed to flee the scene. Five suspects were later arrested and are under investigation. Just a day earlier, another cop had lost his life while returning home after doing security duty with vaccinators in Peshawar. In another attack on Sunday, a roadside IED in South Waziristan exploded when a police van escorting a polio vaccination team was passing by. One officer travelling in the van was injured. Fortunately, the vaccinators in both incidents remained unhurt. The attacks took place on the third day of a five-day polio vaccination drive in 18 districts of the province announced by the KP government to inoculate around 3.7m children. In early June, two policemen assigned to protect vaccinators had been gunned down in Mardan district, KP, by unknown assailants.

The uptick in these murderous attacks is a tragic turn of events that once again threatens Pakistan's efforts to eliminate the crippling disease from within its borders. This particular aspect of extremist violence first began with the killings of five polio vaccinators, four in Karachi and one in Peshawar, in December 2012. It has dogged the anti-polio campaign ever since, with more than 100 vaccinators and security personnel associated with the campaign slain over the following years at the hands of extremist elements. Pakistan and Afghanistan remain the last two countries in the world where polio remains endemic. In 2018, we came tantalisingly close to eradicating the disease, but the numbers surged in 2019 as a result of various lapses in policy and infrastructure, according to the International Monitoring Board. Last year, 84 cases of wild poliovirus and 135 cases of cVDPV2 were reported. However, by end June 2021, only one case of wild poliovirus and eight of cVDPV2 had surfaced. Now that the government has got its act together, extremist elements are putting these hard-won gains in peril. They must be hunted down and punished to send a message to others who would deprive our children of their future.

Myanmar about-face

SIX months into the coup that sent Myanmar's hybrid civ-mil government packing, the generals have made their intentions clear: they are in no hurry to return to any form of representative rule. While addressing the country recently, coup leader Gen Min Aung Hlaing said that emergency rule would be extended to 2023, while the military ruler also declared himself prime minister. Moreover, he put to rest any chances of reconciliation with civilian leader Aung Sang Suu Kyi and her NLD party by accusing the organisation of "terrorism". While there was a massive civil disobedience campaign against the junta's takeover, it seems fatigue is setting in as the movement has weakened, while the generals tighten their grip over power. Around 900 people have been killed in violence related to anti-coup protests.

For much of its postcolonial history Myanmar has been under military rule. There was some hope that democracy would be allowed to flourish when the NLD won elections in 2015 and Ms Suu Kyi took up the mantle of state counsellor in 2016. However, even this set-up was controlled by the generals as the military granted itself a guaranteed number of seats within the legislature. Ms Suu Kyi's period was not exactly ideal. For example, she did little to stop the military from pursuing murderous policies against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority although

continuing on the path of full, unhindered democracy could have improved the situation. Earlier this year, the generals decided to drop the facade and hoard all power for themselves. The coup of course does not bode well for Myanmar, especially for its ethnic and religious minorities. There is pressure, especially from the West, on Asean — the regional grouping Myanmar is part of — to convince the generals to stop the crackdown on activists. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the junta will relinquish power anytime soon, and the cycle of dictatorship and stalled democratic experiments Myanmar has experienced for the last several decades will likely continue.

A tragic anniversary

TWO years ago today, New Delhi took the condemnable step of revoking India-held Kashmir's special status by tinkering with constitutional provisions in an attempt to brush the over seven-decade-old issue under the carpet. However, this reprehensible move has failed to break the Kashmiris' spirit and their longing for freedom and dignity.

Pakistan's foreign minister has written to the UN Security Council to remind the world body that the stalemate in IJK continues, and the people of the occupied region continue to be denied their fundamental rights by the BJP-led government in New Delhi. As Shah Mahmood Qureshi observed in the letter, India's actions of Aug 5, 2019 are a "violation of ... international law, including the UNSC resolutions", while adding that New Delhi continues to keep a massive military presence in the disputed region. Moreover, thousands of Kashmiris have been held in detention, while others have been killed extrajudicially, the foreign minister's letter points out.

But it is not just Pakistan that has been speaking up about the dismal situation in occupied Kashmir. Human Rights Watch has spoken of India's "harsh and discriminatory restrictions on Muslim-majority areas" of the held region while Amnesty International has also criticised India's ham-fisted approach in IJK. Moreover, several members of the European Parliament have urged the EU to take note of the "humanitarian situation" there. In a letter to the European Commission president, they have expressed "grave concern" over the situation in occupied Kashmir while slamming the arbitrary detentions and the misuse of antiterrorism laws by India.

Normally, such bad press would urge governments to review their methods, but the pro-Hindutva dispensation in New Delhi seems unfazed, although Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reached out to loyalist Kashmiri politicians, including some his government had until recently held in detention. The Indian leader had summoned some of the pro-India leaders, including former chief ministers Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah, to New Delhi in June, though the pro-freedom Hurriyat factions were excluded from the audience. But even here, Ms Mufti told Mr Modi that political prisoners should be released and Article 370 should be restored. While Mr Modi may have listened to such entreaties, he clearly wasn't interested in acting upon the suggestions.

When even loyalists condemn state policies, it is time to review them. Sadly, this reality has not sunk in in New Delhi. India's attempts to smother the Kashmiri freedom movement have failed and it is indeed time for it to review its policies. For starters, Kashmir's people must be allowed to assemble and express themselves, while detained leaders, including Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Yasin Malik, must be freed. Moreover, attempts to change Kashmir's demography should end, and New Delhi must open channels with the genuine Kashmiri leadership, as well as Pakistan, to resolve this decades-old dispute in a democratic and judicious fashion.

Currency pressure

THE increasing demand for dollars in the wake of surging imports and debt repayments has put significant pressure on the country's exchange rate in the last few months. Deterioration in the exchange rate was expected following the government's decision to combine an expansionary fiscal policy with an accommodating monetary policy to push growth ahead of the 2023 elections. Since July 1, the rupee has slipped by almost 4pc to a 10-month low on the State Bank projection that the current account deficit may widen from 0.6pc of the GDP last fiscal to 2pc-3pc this year on rising imports to support the growth target of 4.8pc. Even though the rupee recovered slightly against the greenback on Wednesday, there is a wider consensus that the currency will remain under pressure in the near term in spite of clear signs of the State Bank's intervention in the market to support the exchange rate. With the dollar gaining strength against other major currencies, the rupee may come under additional pressure. The fresh inflow of \$2.8bn through the IMF's planned allocations for combating Covid-19 challenges may arrest the rupee's fall for now but not for long.

In the last three years, the PTI government has been successful in containing the trade gap, and consequently the current account deficit, by curbing imports. But the trend seems to be reversing as the economy picks up steam, stimulating hefty import growth. Last year, the trade deficit clocked in at \$30.8bn, up from \$23.2bn the previous year. The July data shows that the trade deficit has widened by 81.4pc in one month because of a faster spike in imports compared to exports. Until now the government has been able to build reserves with the help of large foreign borrowings and deposits from friendly countries, as well as the strong increase in remittances. But for how long? The government is targeting exports of \$31.2bn this year. Even if the target is realised it won't be sufficient to close the trade gap or finance the current account as imports are anticipated to grow much faster. The projected slowdown in remittances and continued outflow of foreign private investment may complicate matters and put more pressure on the rupee. The chances of a drawdown of State Bank reserves are unlikely for now. But the surging demand for dollars may compel the government to turn to more foreign loans to support the currency, finance the current account and maintain forex reserves at present levels.

Protecting breastfeeding

A LOT has been said about the fact that 40pc of children under five years in Pakistan are stunted. The reasons usually attributed to this disturbing statistic include rampant poverty, food insecurity and a failing healthcare system. Unfortunately, the solutions often suggested to improve the health of children tend to ignore a crucial aspect of a child's early development: breastfeeding by mothers. Not only would breastfeeding reduce stunting in children, it can also save thousands of newborns' lives, according to the World Health Organisation. Breastfeeding figures vary, but as per the National Nutrition Survey 2018, less than half the infants born are given mother's milk within the first hour of birth. The figures for exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months range from the highest in KP to the lowest in AJK and Balochistan. Indeed, breastfeeding protects a child against diarrhoea and pneumonia — two leading causes of infant mortality. It also reduces the risk for a number of other ailments including obesity, diabetes, asthma, respiratory illnesses and ear infections and boosts the child's cognitive and emotional well-being. Indeed, breastfed children may have a higher level of intelligence and, as adults, earn more than their peers. Breastfeeding is also seen

to protect mothers from ovarian and breast cancer as well as more common conditions like diabetes and blood pressure.

Unfortunately, the use of formula milk is widely accepted and even encouraged via advertisements. In this context, SAPM Health Dr Faisal Sultan's remarks that prescribing formula milk without adequate reason is a 'crime', is understandable. The natural bonding between a breastfed infant and the mother needs to be protected. Hence the theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week (Aug 1-7): 'Protect breastfeeding: a shared responsibility'. The federal health ministry together with the provincial health departments has issued breastfeeding guidelines to encourage the practice. This is a step in the right direction. However, the authorities should do more to discourage the rampant advertisement of formula milk and ask companies to issue the relevant disclaimers when they promote their products.

Refugee debate

WITH a peaceful settlement to the Afghan conflict looking increasingly remote, there are valid fears of a new refugee crisis. And as always, it will be Afghanistan's neighbours — particularly Pakistan — who will have to bear the brunt of this crisis, unwilling and unready as they may be. However, while Pakistan should do all it can to help Afghan civilians fleeing conflict in their homeland, 'solutions' should not be thrust on this country. In this regard, a senior US State Department official recently told journalists in Washington that "it'll be important [for Pakistan] that their borders remain open". The comment comes on the heels of a statement by Pakistan's national security adviser who, during his trip to the US, reiterated state policy when he said that arrangements for Afghan civilians fleeing conflict should be made "inside their country". Moreover, the US has also suggested that Turkey play host to Afghan refuge-seekers. Ankara has not reacted positively, with Turkish officials saying the US plan to use third countries will spark a "great migration crisis" while also rejecting the "irresponsible decision taken by the United States without consulting our country".

Indeed, while all states, including Afghanistan's neighbours, should play their part to prevent a fresh humanitarian catastrophe in the shape of a refugee crisis, foreign parties should not be dictating terms. The US, which invaded Afghanistan two decades ago, cannot shift the burden of its failed nation-building adventures onto

others. All states must cooperate to house, feed and care for Afghan refugees. In this regard, Pakistan's position is fair: after hosting millions of Afghan refugees for decades, it is in no position to allow any more in its cities. The best solution, as the government has highlighted, are safe zones along the border where non-combatants can be housed away from violence. If this is not possible, camps can be created just across the border in Pakistan to prevent a fresh influx towards the cities. Moreover, as Pakistan is not responsible for Afghanistan's crisis — foreign states and Afghanistan's political class and warlords share that dubious distinction — it should not be left in the lurch when refugees do come. Foreign powers, particularly the US and its Nato allies, must contribute materially to the well-being of Afghans fleeing conflict, under the aegis of the UN.

Nevertheless, while Pakistan is in no position to support a large refugee population, Afghan civilians, if and when they come, should be treated humanely. It is easy to target such vulnerable populations with xenophobic vitriol, but it should be remembered that the mess in Afghanistan is not the handiwork of the common Afghan. Powerful forces have toyed with that country for decades, while refugees fleeing conflict from any war zone — Iraq, Syria etc — must be dealt with by the international community with respect and compassion.

Police sacrifices

THE country observed a special day on Wednesday to pay homage to members of the police force who sacrificed their lives in the line of duty. In Islamabad, President Arif Alvi was the chief guest at a function organised by the police and in his speech he acknowledged that the police were the front-line force against terrorism and crime. Federal Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said the next five or six months would be a challenge for the Capital Police and asked them to remain vigilant. The IG Islamabad Qazi Jamil Rehman highlighted the steps taken for the welfare of the families of the martyrs. Many such events took place across the country to highlight the gallantry of policemen and women who laid down their lives while combating crime and terrorism.

The police have a valid point when they complain that their services do not get the acknowledgement they deserve. One reason is that the police's public dealing leads to negative acts getting highlighted much more than the positive ones. The police suffer from an image problem because they have faced years of neglect and

abuse at the hands of successive governments. The politicisation of the force, insecurity of tenure, lack of training, and the traditional role that the state has assigned to the police, have all contributed to making the law enforcers a target of criticism and public mistrust. However, recent years have shown that this same force has been at the forefront of fighting terrorism and achieved remarkable success despite limited resources. Both officers and jawans of the police have displayed valour in the face of daunting odds and delivered success often at the cost of their own lives. This admirable role of the police has not garnered sufficient attention from governments and the people. It is high time therefore that the police are given due recognition for bravely taking on terrorists and prevailing against them. This recognition should translate into more resources, better emoluments, improved training, modern equipment and greater accolades. Police reform is a promise that remains unfulfilled due to the weakness of governments. The police deserve such a reform as much as the public that they are mandated to serve. Such reform would enable the police to enhance their capabilities while securing them from political manipulation and abuse. We owe it to the police to make sure such reforms are implemented sooner rather than later.

Desecration of temple

THE shameful desecration of a Hindu temple in the town of Bhong, Punjab, has once again exposed how tenuous the rights of minorities are in today's Pakistan. A mob vandalised the place of worship on Wednesday after a nine-year-old Hindu boy, who had allegedly urinated in a local seminary, was granted bail by a local court. In a shocking video of the attack, several men can be seen with rods and a crowbar smashing the glass cases in which the idols were placed and damaging them as well.

Lighting fixtures, etc were also damaged. One can only be grateful that no one from the minority community was injured, or worse. However, the orgy of violence, captured on video by several participants, will send a ripple of fear through the local Hindu community, as well as reinforce the sense of insecurity among Pakistan's minorities as a whole, the prime minister's condemnation of the incident notwithstanding.

This is yet another case that illustrates the dangerous level to which society has become radicalised, and how vigilante violence can be fanned by a few mischief-

makers, who often have other, very worldly, agendas. The case was registered against the minor on July 24 under the blasphemy law. Despite some elders of the Hindu community tendering an apology to the madressah administration, all hell broke loose on the instigation of some individuals when the court granted relief to the boy some 10 days later.

Shops in the town were forcibly closed and hundreds of people blocked the Sukkur-Multan Motorway in protest. There are reports that old financial disputes between the Hindu and Muslim communities in the area are the underlying cause behind the unrest. It is often the case that religious disputes are deliberately escalated in order to 'neutralise' differences over money or land, and drive out the 'target', be it a family or an entire community. The government must ensure, that all those involved in vandalising the temple, and those who instigated them, are punished under the law — and immediately have the temple repaired.

Karachi's new administrator

MURTAZA Wahab's name had been doing the rounds for the past several weeks as the next administrator of Karachi and on Thursday, the PPP man was officially given the job by the Sindh government. Though Mr Wahab is one of the PPP's rising stars and one of the party's few recognisable faces from Karachi, critics are not entirely wrong when they say that Sindh's ruling party is playing politics by placing a loyalist in charge of Karachi, a city that is not a PPP stronghold. After all, the post of administrator is no replacement for an elected mayor answerable to the people. Ever since Waseem Akhtar's tenure as mayor ended last year, bureaucrats have been running the city. However, over the last few years, Karachi's condition has deteriorated considerably. Heaps of garbage, overflowing sewers, crumbling infrastructure and high crime are now what Pakistan's financial capital is known for. Suffice to say, Karachi has become a giant dump. Comparisons are made with the Musharraf-era local government system. Though that set-up was not perfect, it did deliver far better than the system the PPP introduced, which was widely seen as concentrating powers in the hands of the provincial government. The results of the PPP's LG system are depressing; not only Karachi but the whole of urban Sindh presents a picture of utter neglect.

Mr Wahab may be an active politician, but what Karachi and Sindh's other cities need is a system, not personalities. While the new administrator must concentrate

on fixing the highly unsanitary conditions of the metropolis — experts have said the foul atmosphere in Karachi can aggravate the Covid crisis — in the long term the Sindh government needs to frame a new LG law which is democratic in nature and devolves power to the local bodies. Citizens must not be made to plead before ministers and bureaucrats to have their streets swept or gutters cleaned. This should be the job of elected civic bodies that are run through taxpayers' funds and are answerable to the people.

Option to return and fight

THE British Home Office's refusal to accommodate former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's request to extend his visa in the UK on medical grounds has led to a commotion. Many of his critics took to social media to predict that the self-exiled PML-N leader, who has been living in London for over 20 months, would soon be sent back by the UK authorities.

PTI ministers also jumped in to offer him temporary travel documents on short notice if he decided to return to face graft charges and complete his sentence in what his party claims is a trumped-up corruption case. For the government, the Home Office decision is an endorsement of its stance that the PML-N's assertion regarding their leader's precarious health condition is wrong. Meanwhile, the PML-N has tried to downplay the implications of the decision, and has ruled out Mr Sharif's return anytime soon.

Indeed, there may be ways for Mr Sharif to legally extend his stay in the UK for a few years despite the visa rejection, as immigration experts have pointed out. He has already filed an appeal with the British Immigration Tribunal so that he can legally remain in the UK till a decision is made. This could take up to one and a half years. Even when his appeal rights are exhausted, the former prime minister could continue his stay in London beyond that period if he chooses to avail the subsequent judicial reviews in case of an unfavourable tribunal decision. But will that be a wise course to follow?

In self-exile, Mr Sharif has enjoyed complete liberty to lead his party remotely and express his views without restraint. His return will land him in prison as the government has repeatedly indicated, and will limit his ability to talk freely and stay in touch with his party unless he can get some relief from the courts, which is improbable.

Ever since he was allowed by the court to leave the country for medical treatment on a four-week bail, he has repeatedly pledged to come back although he has never indicated when he planned to return. If ever there was an appropriate time to keep his pledge, it is now. Instead of trying to extend his stay abroad indefinitely, he should return to fight his case in court, regardless of his and his party's reservations about the charges against him. His presence would boost the PML-N's chances in the next elections.

However, it is also quite obvious that the government has created an environment where it is seen as pursuing its political rivals through agencies such as NAB and FIA, with a vengeance. It must now restrain itself and issue a passport to the PML-N leader that it had so far refused to do. By appearing to target Mr Sharif and his party, it is only causing more divisions in an already acrimonious environment.

Still on the red list

THE UK's decision to keep Pakistan on its travel red list has come as a blow to citizens. Not only do many feel despondent about being unable to travel to and from the UK, there is also a growing sense that the decision to keep Pakistan on the red list while India moved to the amber list is rooted more in politics than in science. The announcement came as a shock to British Pakistanis, as the cost of hotel quarantine if they wish to travel back to the UK has also been increased by £500. Labour MPs in the UK have called out the UK government for a decision they say is discriminatory and biased against Pakistan. Several have pointed out that India's Covid-19 infections per 100,000 people is higher than the rate in Pakistan. MP Yasmin Qureshi went so far as to say the decision is based on economic and trade partnerships instead of science, as India is a big trade partner of the UK compared to Pakistan.

The UK government adjusts its traffic light travel system based on multiple factors, and to understand its decision it is important to see where Pakistan lies on that spectrum. It considers vaccination rates, infection rates, the presence of variants and access to scientific data. At the moment, Pakistan's fully vaccinated citizens make up just over 2pc of the population. Although new infections overall are lower than most countries in the region, recent weeks have seen a spike in cases in Karachi with a lockdown underway in the city. In comparison, India has vaccinated about 8pc of its population, but its daily positive cases this week have averaged at

over 40,000. It has also reported over 80 cases of the Delta-plus variant. While it makes sense for the UK to have shifted the UAE and Qatar to the amber list, as their vaccination rates are even higher than the UK's, the decision to remove India from the red list does reek of preferential treatment. The Pakistan high commissioner has taken up Pakistan's case with the UK government and will aim to persuade British authorities to change their minds by re-examining the numbers. But in the meanwhile, our authorities should realise that this formula will be applied till our vaccination rates don't pick up. Though the government is hitting new daily jab targets, it must maintain the momentum and ensure that the process of vaccine procurement, availability and awareness does not hit snags.

TikTok ban

THE Islamabad High Court's directive to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority that it should review its ban on the short video-sharing app TikTok is a much-needed call for preserving the right to freedom of expression and digital rights in an environment of intimidation. This week, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah raised some relevant and critical questions about the telecom authorities' decision to ban the platform. The judge observed that the authority cannot use its powers in an "unbridled manner" to block access to a popular app just because of its misuse by a few users. He also dubbed the action as moral policing in an arbitrary manner, saying this is not the job of the PTA. He noted that the benefits of the platform outweigh the disadvantages, and questioned whether the PTA had even applied proper standards for judging obscenity or immorality. It also emerged that the PTA had not consulted the government before taking this controversial step.

The PTA's disdain for TikTok is obvious, given how the authority jumps at every opportunity to ban it. But this also betrays the censor-happy authority's poor understanding of the platform. TikTok allows its users the unfettered freedom to create anything, and encourages originality and humour. It is used by citizens of all ages, across the socioeconomic divide and in every corner of the country. TikTok users are not just people having harmless fun, they are also teaching skills, have a political voice and are talking about all kinds of experiences. The fact that our telecommunication authority fails to see the value in this content is unfortunate, and, instead, points to an appalling inclination to censor any platform that allows individuals to have a voice. Though platforms have more work to do to improve

their community standards, it is unclear what the government's reservations are. Lumping all the so-called objectionable content under the umbrella term of 'obscenity' is unacceptable, as is the lack of transparency in the regulator's complaints. The fact that it has a history of policing 'morality' only compounds the problem. The PTA needs to engage with the government and communicate its reservations about the content it deems genuinely harmful. These reservations can then be taken to the platform for review. Consulting with digital rights experts and activists would be greatly beneficial in this process. This blanket ban on an app that democratises creativity and is a source of considerable income for scores of citizens is foolish and anti-people.

Looming peril

THE situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate as Afghan Taliban capture more territory and start to threaten major cities. Britain has advised its citizens to evacuate Afghanistan immediately given the gravity of the situation. Prospects of a negotiated settlement of the conflict appear remote and all domestic and external stakeholders are now bracing for a protracted civil war.

The spillover of this violence will affect all neighbours of Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Diplomatic efforts by the US, Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan have failed to produce dividends and therefore it is prudent to ask who should share the blame for this terrible fate that has befallen Afghanistan. There is enough blame for everyone, which means it is unfair to pin most of it on Pakistan that the US and many Western countries appear to be preparing to do. Pakistan may have made mistakes in the past by choosing favourites but times have changed and lessons have been learnt.

It is true that Pakistan has in the past enjoyed significant leverage with the Taliban but the poor outcome of the Doha talks shows that this leverage is now limited. This was evident when on Friday the Taliban shut a border crossing with Pakistan, demanding that visa restrictions be eased. Indeed, no country will be more adversely affected by the situation in Afghanistan than Pakistan. It is in Pakistan's interest that violence subsides and a power-sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the Kabul government is reached. The absence of such an agreement is not due to lack of trying by Pakistan.

The threat of terrorism spilling across into our territory has now become a major concern. It is estimated that terrorists belonging to TTP, Al Qaeda and IS number over 7,000 and are based in Afghan territory across the border from Pakistan. The chances of them slipping into Pakistan along with the flow of refugees are very real. These concerns have been communicated to all key players and it is hoped that the gravity of such threats will be duly acknowledged by them.

The primary concern for Pakistan at this stage should be security of the homeland. There is not much that it can do to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan but there is a lot that it must do to minimise the impact of the potential spillover. During their recent visit to the US, National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf and DG ISI Lt Gen Faiz Hameed are reported to have communicated these concerns to US officials. Foremost among these concerns is Pakistan's argument that refugees should be camped on the Afghan side of the border. The issue remains unresolved and can balloon into a crisis if not handled in a timely manner. The Pakistani leadership should start communicating its policies in light of the evolving situation so that there is no ambiguity on where we stand.

Chaos in education

WHILE there is little doubt that Pakistan has fared better than many countries in terms of damage caused by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, quite a bit of this success appears to be down to luck. There is certainly no lack of chaos amongst the ranks of authority, and a tendency to work with little inter-provincial coordination. A case in point is the educational sector, where millions of students have suffered an unprecedented degree of uncertainty created by the absence of a coherent policy regarding attendance at educational institutes at both the centre and provincial levels.

It is essential to note that the same challenge is being faced by every country, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the extent to which that country has been impacted by successive waves of the virus and the ability of respective governments to recognise that this is an ongoing and difficult situation and to act accordingly. But to come down to specifics, in Pakistan each wave has been met with a piecemeal response, one that often works at cross purposes. On Wednesday, in Islamabad, the Inter-Provincial Education Ministers' Committee decided that except for badly hit Sindh, all educational institutions would run in-

person classes, but that attendance would be staggered. However, it was decided that universities and colleges will remain open without restrictions. If the logic is that older students (the minimum age for vaccination in Pakistan is 18) will presumably have been vaccinated, are we to understand that it will be ensured that each and every individual on campus will have proof thereof? Through the 18th Amendment, education is a provincial matter; but surely the very existence of the IPEMC is to ensure some degree of uniformity in responses, even though Covid-19-related data on each province and city fluctuates on a daily basis. What we have at stake here is the future of an entire generation of students in a country with already abysmal literacy rates. Surely more forward-looking mechanisms can be devised.

Curriculum debate

BACK to school this August was a momentous occasion for primary school students in Punjab. The province became the first to implement the Single National Curriculum in madressahs and from grades one to five in both public and private schools within its jurisdiction. Aside from Sindh, which has refused to adopt it citing the 18th Amendment according to which education is a provincial subject, the other provinces and the ICT also plan to introduce it as soon as possible. The SNC for grades six to eight will be introduced next year, and up to Matric in 2023.

From the outset, the merits or otherwise of introducing the SNC have been hotly debated. One thing is certain, this may be the most revolutionary step taken in the education arena since Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's nationalisation of schools and colleges in 1972. That measure had far-reaching repercussions, and general consensus holds that it proved extremely detrimental to educational standards. Pakistan cannot afford another ill-thought-out experiment in this sector.

The PTI government projects the SNC as a silver bullet that will magically resolve Pakistan's educational woes, or at least the bulk of them. Unfortunately, the problem is far too complex and the SNC is unlikely to address the more important aspects of it. It may even make matters worse, bringing down standards across the board.

To be fair, the PTI during its electoral campaign also spoke of putting all out-of-school children in classrooms, improving the quality of education, and emphasising technical and vocational education. However, it has only made progress in

introducing the SNC. It has billed the SNC as a way to end the ‘education apartheid’ in the country — which, on the face of it sounds commendable.

However, the educational apartheid is not only on account of different curricula pursued by different strains of education linked with socioeconomic status. In fact, it has far more to do with access and quality. But to put some 23m out-of-school children in school requires twice as many schools as we have at present, along with the associated human resource and funding requirements. Improving education quality means investing far more in teachers’ training than we do. Then there’s the issue of missing essential facilities. All this requires a massive infusion of funds. The cheapest option was the SNC.

Nevertheless this was at least a golden opportunity to improve the existing curriculum. However, the SNC remains content heavy, which encourages rote learning rather than critical thinking. The subliminal messaging is problematic and non-inclusive. More religious material has been included in subjects other than Islamiyat, which is unfair to non-Muslim students. Girls and women are always dressed conservatively, and families are invariably stereotypical two-parent households. Single parents do not exist in these depictions of ‘respectability’ that are completely out of touch with contemporary Pakistani society. There is, in short, little to commend the SNC.

Tree plantation drive

WITH the monsoon plantation drive in full swing in Islamabad and the adjoining areas, the government appears to be making good progress on its Ten Billion-Tree Tsunami Programme. Last week, Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated a nationwide monsoon plantation drive by planting a sapling in Islamabad’s Fatima Jinnah Park and also in Nathiagali. Over the course of the next few weeks, the Ministry of Climate Change and the Capital Development Authority will ensure the plantation of at least half a million saplings in and around the capital city. Pakistan has one of the world’s highest deforestation rates, between 0.2pc and 0.5pc — the worst in Asia after war-torn Afghanistan. Rapid and unregulated development, both industrial and urban, a high population growth rate and a powerful timber mafia have reduced the country’s forest cover to a mere 5.7pc, a far cry from the recommended 25pc. A continuation of the Billion-Tree Tsunami project in KP, the 10 Billion-Tree programme seems to have served as a model for international

ventures such as the World Economic Forum's One Trillion Trees Initiative. Trees act as lungs for the earth and help in cooling down the atmosphere, while working as a barrier to mitigate the impact of natural disasters such as floods, heatwaves and heavy rains. Climate change is upon us and Pakistan is among the countries most vulnerable to its potentially devastating effects. The mass tree plantation drive, then, is to be welcomed. A similar spring plantation drive was held earlier in February as well involving 51 Miyawaki urban forests in Lahore.

However, for this effort to be effective, it needs to gel within an overarching afforestation framework that aims to conserve and protect the existing tree cover in the country. First, the government must restore the ban on forest cutting (ironically ended in 2014 by the PTI government in KP) and stop allowing private developers to build on forest land. Then drastic measures are needed to control the activities of the timber mafia, and ensure strict punishment for those violating government law and endangering the environment. Lastly, the climate change department should make sure that local communities in remote areas have access to alternative fuel so that they do not cut down trees for firewood; communities must also be educated on the importance of environmental conservation. Environmental ambitions must be reflected in the overall developmental and economic policy of the country if we want to conserve our natural surroundings.

Lebanon violence

RECENT cross-border hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel have sent up red flags, with the UN monitoring team in the region terming the situation "very dangerous". While rocket attacks into Israel reportedly carried out by Palestinian groups based in Lebanon are thought to have triggered the latest crisis, the situation has rapidly turned into a confrontation between Israel and its arch-nemesis Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese political party and armed group backed by Iran. Many see the exchange as part of a wider regional struggle between Israel and its allies and Iran and its affiliates. Tensions between both camps have been high of late; as recently as last month an oil tanker owned by an Israeli company was targeted in a deadly drone attack in the Gulf of Oman. Israel and its Western friends have blamed Iran for the attack, though Tehran has denied it was involved. The skirmishes in Lebanon may well be connected to this incident. However, both Hezbollah and Israel have said that while they are ready for battle, this latest showdown is unlikely to spiral into a wider conflagration.

While it is reassuring that both Tel Aviv and Hezbollah want to avoid a conflict, there is a long history of bad blood between them, with both sides having fought a devastating war in 2006. This is the first time that Israel has launched air strikes in Lebanon since 2014. Therefore, considering the volatility of the situation, both sides must display restraint. In particular, Israel — which has a history of occupying others' land and violating the sovereignty of its neighbours, while also mercilessly pounding the Palestinians — must be reined in by its powerful backers. In the long term, unless there is a significant truce and rapprochement between the American-led bloc, which includes Israel and the Gulf Arabs, and Iran and its regional allies such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis, a large-scale flare-up in the Middle East may only be a matter of time.

Culture of sports

FOR the first time in nearly a decade, Pakistan had serious hopes of an Olympic medal — its first since 1992 and first ever in athletics — when Arshad Nadeem arrived at the Tokyo Olympic Stadium on Saturday for the men's javelin final. Arshad, Pakistan's first-ever track-and-field athlete to qualify for the Games, had made history when he reached the final and was aiming to do better than weightlifter Talha Talib who narrowly missed out on bronze earlier in Tokyo.

Arshad eventually finished fifth, meaning Pakistan's wait for an Olympic medal will go on till the Games in Paris in 2024. Arshad's and Talha's performances showed that Pakistan has improved since the 2016 Rio Olympics. But that cannot be put down to any encouragement from Prime Minister Imran Khan, although as a former sportsman he is well aware of the serious deficiencies that beset the sports sector. Arshad and Talha had raised our hopes purely because of their own talent and struggle, with a little help from their respective federations.

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The countdown to Paris begins now. If Arshad and Talha are to improve on their performances in 2024 and win the Olympic medals Pakistan has been longing for, the work must start now. It must be understood that the Olympics define a stage where those who have been the best or close to the best come out on top. That only happens when there is a system in place — at every level. Sports have regressed in Pakistan, the Tokyo Olympics marking the second successive Games for which the national hockey team — the winner of eight of the country's 10

Olympic medals — hasn't been able to qualify. Even in non-Olympic sports like cricket and squash, where Pakistan once used to dominate, performances have deteriorated. Differences between the government, the sports federations and the Olympic Association don't help and the devolution of sports to the provinces in accordance with the 18th Amendment has created hurdles of its own, leaving only limited powers to the Pakistan Sports Board.

It is imperative for the prime minister to call a meeting of all stakeholders immediately and devise a way forward and work towards building a sports culture in the country. It is about creating an environment to facilitate access to sports. Renovation and development of sports facilities is the first step towards that, one that will help grassroots programmes to flourish. Most importantly, schools must align themselves with the government plan and allocate sufficient time and resources to physical fitness and sports activities. It has to be a multi-tiered structure that propels the talented ones to colleges and universities up to the national level where federations, ideally run by sports professionals, will take them to the next level. A thriving sports culture would not only provide a broader base of athletes but also increase competition and representation, leading to greater chances of winning medals at global events.

Ogra's recommendation

OGRA HAS rightly, albeit after a long delay, approached the government and lawmakers for the formulation of a transparent policy to encourage private competition in gas distribution development projects to promote an efficient gas market. In its letter to a parliamentary panel on energy and public-sector stakeholders, the oil and gas regulator has called for urgently devising these guidelines for creating a competitive market. "Please be advised that the exclusivity of the gas companies [SNGPL and SSGC] to operate in franchise areas is no longer valid and hence new development schemes are to be awarded on a competitive basis," a report in this paper quoted the letter as saying. Ogra's other objective seems to be to rid consumers of the high-handedness of the two inefficient public-sector gas utilities, which are demanding a monstrous 220pc increase in prices to recover the cost of their planned expansion of pipeline networks to new areas and residential consumers, as well as to meet their estimated revenue requirements for this fiscal.

Why are the companies eager to extend their networks despite the increasing gas shortages and growing inter-corporate gas circular debt which, reportedly has already spiked to Rs532bn on account of their inability to pay the suppliers? The reasons are entirely selfish. There is a huge built-in incentive in the gas-pricing mechanism for these firms to expand their pipeline networks and residential connections since their guaranteed returns of 17pc-18pc are determined on the basis of their assets rather than on their sales as is international practice. New connections mean new assets and greater returns. It does not matter to them whether or not they have gas to supply to consumers. No wonder then that these utilities are always trying to put more pressure on Ogra to incorporate their expansion plans while determining their tariffs even if it means increasing the financial pressure on consumers. This also helps the gas companies hide their inefficiencies and cover their large system losses and theft. All this contributes to the delay in the allocation of pipeline capacity to the private sector for bringing in imported gas although the two companies' monopoly in the market ended over 10 years ago. Thus, the government cannot force the state-owned utilities to become self-sustaining by improving their operational and revenue status unless their existing business model is changed and private competition encouraged. Nor can it tackle gas shortages, especially in winters, without private participation.

Muharram precautions

THE Covid-19 pandemic shows no sign of abating, with the Delta variant continuing to infect a large number of people, even those who are vaccinated. As Covid-19 cases continue to climb and doctors warn that space in hospitals is scarce, the situation is fuelling alarm. More than 4,000 new cases were reported in the country in the last 24 hours, while at least 50 died from the infection. Pakistan has been lucky so far in being able to evade the disturbing scenarios in other countries such as India and Italy. But given the extra contagious nature of the Delta strain and possibly other new variants, the situation will continue to worsen if strict public precautions are not taken. Reports of Covid-19 wards being full are already emerging from Karachi and Lahore, with other cities reporting a similar situation. It is against this backdrop that Muharram is set to begin. Majalis will be held both at home and in mosques and imambargahs that will be attended by large gatherings, considerably enhancing the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Unless there is very strict observation of all government-mandated SOPs, the outcome could be catastrophic.

The real test, however, will be the huge mourning processions on the 8th, 9th and 10th of Muharram. The authorities in Sindh have consulted the leaders of the Shia community and have asked them to ensure strict compliance with all SOPs during the majalis and processions. A similar exercise should be in evidence at the federal level and also in the other provinces. Shia religious leaders should themselves strictly observe safety protocols and call upon the mourners to do the same so that the majalis and processions do not turn into super-spreaders. It is also the responsibility of the public to take precautions as enough is known about how to keep the virus at bay. While security against possible terrorist threats has always been a concern at Muharram gatherings, this time the enemy can prove to be far more deadly.

Food out of reach

FOOD price inflation has been rearing its menacing head for the last couple of years, increasing the strain on lower-middle-income household budgets. Though headline inflation has dropped to below 10pc in the last few months, food inflation is still in the double digits. In a country like Pakistan, where most families spend over half their income on food, the increasing cost of transport, petrol, electricity and indirect taxes have raised valid concerns about the potential escalation in hunger, poverty and malnutrition. This is particularly true for people who are already within or just outside the poverty bracket. The number of moderately to severely food-insecure households, for example, rose to 16.4 per 100 households, as surveyed by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, in 2019-20 from 15.9 a year before. Since the survey was carried out before the Covid-19 outbreak, it reflects only the impact of job losses, income reduction and IMF-mandated economic stabilisation policies on people's lives.

The pandemic is projected by many economic experts to have compounded the misery of the people, pushing millions out of work, and into poverty. The new wave of higher-than-expected global commodity inflation coupled with upward adjustments in domestic energy prices will worsen the situation. The year-on-year changes in July staple prices in the domestic market, as reflected in the Finance Division's data, paint a gloomy picture for the public. Likewise, the FAO Food Price Index comprising five commodity group price indices — cereals, vegetable oils, sugar, meat and dairy — also points to more difficult times ahead as it shows that global food prices were 31pc higher in July than a year ago.

With food price inflation aggravating the troubles of low-middle-income families that are already struggling with a substantial reduction in purchasing power and loss of jobs, the government's response has been less than adequate. In spite of its claims to the contrary, it has been unable to reduce the burden of spiking domestic food prices by tackling such local factors as supply disruptions and artificial shortages of staples that contribute to the hike in food prices. The protracted mishandling of the sugar and wheat markets is just one example of the mess. With Pakistan becoming a net importer of key food items such as wheat, sugar, edible oil and pulses, the prospects of controlling food inflation appear rather dim in the near term given the escalating global commodity markets. Things are going to get especially worse for the poor, as they will find it harder to feed their families. The long-term solution to food inflation lies in achieving self-sufficiency by focusing on the development of the country's agriculture sector. High food inflation should be a cause of concern for Pakistan's policymakers since it is not only detrimental to the well-being of the people but also to the government's growth plans.

Contaminated water

SHINY new high-rises and sprawling gated communities are a superficial yardstick of 'development', and yet are often touted as a barometer of progress. Real development takes into account the well-being of people, which is an amalgam of several factors. One of them is the very key to life: water. On this score, Pakistan is falling appallingly short. The government on Monday made a shocking revelation in the National Assembly. According to the results of tests carried out by the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources on underground water in 29 cities, there are 20 cities where water collected from various sources was found to be more than 50pc unsafe for drinking. In three of these urban centres — Mirpurkhas, Shaheed Benazirabad and Gilgit — the underground water, as per PCRWR data, is 100pc unsafe. Following close behind are Multan (94pc), Karachi (92pc), Sargodha (83pc), Bahawalpur (76pc) and Muzaffarabad (70pc), to cite just the top eight in the list. The water was found to be contaminated mainly with arsenic, iron, fluoride and bacteria.

This is a dire situation, warnings about which have been coming thick and fast. Bacteria is a major factor in diseases of the intestinal tract — some of them potentially fatal especially for children and infants, among whom diarrhoea is the

leading cause of mortality. Prolonged exposure to contaminants like arsenic in drinking water can lead to cancer and skin lesions; and is also associated with cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In utero and in early childhood, it may even have a negative impact on cognitive development. A report by the Pakistan Medical Association released at the end of last year stated that the poor quality of drinking water is responsible for nearly 30pc of diseases and 40pc of deaths in the country. As it is, an IMF report in 2018 ranked Pakistan as third on a list of countries facing acute water scarcity; according to it, our per capita water availability is 1,017 cubic metres, just a notch higher than the scarcity threshold of 1,000 cubic metres. A combination of factors has led us to this pass. These include population growth, urbanisation, climate change, poor water management such as outdated irrigation methods, indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste, untreated sewage contaminating water mains, and a lack of political will to put in place sustainable solutions. We are hurtling headlong into disaster. And unless drastic measures are not taken immediately, there will be no turning back.

Temple restoration

QUICK and efficient action by the Rahim Yar Khan district administration not only prevented a bad situation from getting worse, it also provided hope to the beleaguered Hindu community that has reason to feel threatened. The district administration succeeded in restoring a temple in the village of Bhong last week to its original state and handing it back to the Hindu community.

The temple had been vandalised by an enraged mob last Wednesday after a nine-year-old Hindu boy, said to be mentally challenged, had relieved himself inside a seminary. According to the Rahim Yar Khan deputy commissioner, a boundary wall will also be constructed around the temple for security. The cost for the security of the temple and building the boundary wall will be recovered from those responsible for damaging the temple, he said. Work on the restoration of the idols will take around two months. A detailed security plan is also said to be in the works and the Hindu families who have left the area out of fear will be called back after proper security clearance.

Editorial: Minorities' plight

Given the strong feeling of fear and insecurity that grips Pakistan's religious minorities, it was encouraging to see the authorities crack down so promptly on the perpetrators and repair the damage to the temple.

Different local courts have so far sent about 100 suspects to jail on judicial remand. These included 14 people who were presented in court by police officials on a Sunday, despite the day being a holiday. This kind of action by police and the courts has not been seen very often.

Usually, the bureaucracy and police, and even senior political leaders including those in government, are intimidated by the power that far right religious forces wield in the country. The Rahim Yar Khan district administration deserves to be commended for refusing to be cowed and for taking quick action which should serve as an example to other local administrations, and motivate government leaders to do more to protect minority rights.

Crisis in the making

THE Supreme Court is the final court of appeal, seen as the ultimate bulwark against injustice in a country that often sees too little justice, where society is riven by ethnic, religious, socioeconomic and gender-based fault lines. When the apex court itself appears in danger of falling victim to divisions within, it creates a sense of deep unease among the people. Such divisions have unfortunately been obvious for some time now, often exacerbated by pressures from without. The furore over the possible appointment of Sindh High Court Chief Justice Ahmed Ali Shaikh as ad hoc judge of the Supreme Court is but the latest episode in an ongoing controversy. It was precipitated by the Judicial Commission of Pakistan's recommendation last month, by a razor-thin majority, of Justice Mohammed Ali Mazhar's elevation to the apex court. The problem was that the judge is fifth in terms of seniority on the SHC bench. Lawyers' bodies across the country vehemently opposed this move and boycotted the courts for a day. They argued that the JCP was violating the criteria of seniority as the guiding principle for elevation to the superior judiciary, according to which Justice Shaikh's name should have been recommended.

The controversy took a further turn when the JCP decided to consider appointing the SHC chief justice as an ad hoc judge to the Supreme Court, despite Justice Shaikh's having expressed in a letter to the Commission his disinclination to take up that role. Lawyers' bodies, already incensed, once again boycotted the courts throughout Sindh. On Tuesday, the JCP voted by a majority of five to four to invite the province's top judge to accept the appointment for a one-year period, provided he gave his consent. Interestingly, those in favour of extending the invitation were the same JCP members who had voted to elevate a junior judge from the SHC to the apex court, although the attorney general, while supporting the recommendation, said it should be contingent upon Justice Shaikh's acquiescence. However, given what has transpired of late, one cannot discount the possibility that if Justice Shaikh refuses to reconsider — and who can blame him, for most judges would regard such an appointment as adding insult to injury — the JCP will greenlight his appointment anyway against his will.

The JCP's refusal to follow precedent, principles and norms is creating an unnecessary constitutional crisis. That this is shaping up on the heels of the damage sustained by the apex court to its prestige in the course of the government's ill-intentioned reference against Justice Qazi Faez Isa is all the more regrettable. This is the time for the superior judiciary to work towards transparent and objective criteria for elevation to its ranks. It must negate even the slightest impression that anything but integrity underlies its judgements and actions.

PM's Karachi visit

THE prime minister's brief visit to Karachi on Tuesday once again laid bare the frosty relations between the federal and Sindh governments. Imran Khan took a round of the Karachi shipyard and chaired meetings focusing on the city's development, while he also attended events in the neighbouring Lasbela district in Balochistan.

However, the PPP that rules Sindh claimed that Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah was not invited to any of Mr Khan's engagements in Karachi. In fact, the Sindh government said it was 'unaware' of the prime ministerial visit. On the other hand, a handout from the Prime Minister's Office said Mr Khan chaired a meeting regarding the Karachi Transformation Plan. These statements highlight the wide

gap that exists between the centre and the Sindh administration, which ultimately has an effect on the drive to rehabilitate Karachi, as efforts are stymied by politics.

If it is true that the Sindh government — particularly the chief minister — was kept out of the loop regarding Mr Khan's Karachi visit intentionally, then this attitude on the part of the centre is unacceptable. The PTI-led federal government should not ignore the Sindh administration and attempt to rule Karachi through fiats. This will only create bad blood between the centre and Sindh, while also undermining the spirit of the 18th Amendment. That said, the Sindh government must also keep its channels with Islamabad open and pledge to work together with the centre in order to fix Karachi's many problems.

The city is in a shambolic state, and it will require the combined efforts, funds and planning of the federal, Sindh and local governments to bring the metropolis into the 21st century. Indeed, the PTI has a responsibility to work for Karachi as the city gave it a heavy mandate in the last general elections, returning over a dozen representatives to the National Assembly. But this does not mean that the centre should bypass the provincial administration. Funds and expertise are needed from both the centre and the province to help transform Karachi, while the executing agency should be the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation headed by an elected, empowered mayor answerable to the people of the city. Efforts by the federal and Sindh governments to micromanage the city are unlikely to create the positive change Karachi needs. For its part, the Sindh government can do much to improve the metropolis by giving it a functioning and empowered LG system.

Raging wildfires

AFTER centuries of neglect and abuse, the earth appears to have finally lost its cool with mankind. Ferocious fires have been raging in different parts of the world. In North Africa, wildfires in the Kabyle region of Algeria have claimed at least 65 lives, almost half of them of soldiers fighting the blaze and rescuing people from the flames. In Greece, the country faces a “natural disaster of unprecedented proportions” according to Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, as around 600 wildfires are causing devastation “in all corners” of the country. The most affected region is Evia, the second largest island of the country where hundreds of volunteers and firefighters are engaged in putting out the blaze. Fires have also been spreading in Italy's southern regions where firefighters have reportedly

extinguished around 45,000 wildfires since June, almost double the number witnessed last year. Multiple fires have also destroyed large swaths of pine forests in southern Turkey over the past couple of weeks, spelling disaster for the country's tourism industry. Siberia — the region known for its merciless winters — has not been spared either. The smoke of the numerous fires burning there are said to have reached the North Pole. Indeed, the fires burning in Siberia are reported to be bigger than those burning in many countries combined. On the other side of the world, the Dixie Fires in northern California have burnt down over 900 buildings as firefighters brace themselves for more blazes and destruction.

While wildfires in many areas of the world are not an unusual natural phenomenon, and indeed play a part in the survival of certain ecosystems, what is alarming is their frequency and intensity in the present age. Climate change, that is fuelled in large part by man's own contribution to appallingly high carbon emissions, leads to hotter temperatures where one spark can end up devastating thousands of acres of land. This demonstration of the "unprecedented fury of nature" in the words of the Greek prime minister is a clarion call for action.

What is the PDM's goal?

THE Pakistan Democratic Movement opposition alliance wants to groan back into life. After remaining dormant for nearly 10 weeks, its leadership met for a consultative session and decided to restart its activities in earnest. The alliance plans to hold a jalsa in Karachi in the coming days in order to build up momentum. PDM leaders Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Shehbaz Sharif also rejected the PTI government's offer on electoral reforms including the use of electronic voting machines. The meeting was also attended via video link by PML-N supreme leader Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz. As expected, government spokespersons ridiculed the PDM meeting and brushed it aside as a non-event.

When the alliance was formed in September last year, it represented a clear and present danger to the government. Cemented with the joint political weight of the PML-N, PPP, JUI-F and various other smaller parties, the PDM threatened a mass mobilisation of people at a time of increasing economic difficulties for citizens. It got off to a solid start with a successful jalsa in Gujranwala. However, Nawaz Sharif's frontal assault on the establishment by naming names began to create differences with the PPP that preferred a more generalised line of criticism. The

PDM ultimately splintered without achieving any targets it had set for itself. The promised 'long march' to Islamabad and the threat of resignations from the assemblies faded away without a trace.

Since then, the opposition has not been able to pose any significant challenge to the government which is completing its three years in power next week. The PDM may have therefore decided to find fresh relevance for itself but without a clear objective and an intended outcome, it may appear to be 'full of sound and fury signifying nothing'. It is now fairly clear that the government is well on its way to completing its five-year term without having to face any credible existential threat. The PDM can therefore amplify its criticism of the government through its platform, and perhaps attempt to create a fresh narrative to counter the government's increasing confidence, but it does not have any tools by which to weaken the government. The only available option is the one that the PPP leadership has often been mentioning about bringing about an in-house change in Punjab. However, the PML-N is not interested in this option and therefore it is unlikely that the PDM will pursue it with any level of seriousness.

The duality of narrative within the PML-N is also weighing down on the effectiveness of the opposition alliance. Unless the PML-N can clear this confusion and speak with one voice, the PDM will also remain unsure of what it really wants. The alliance may appear re-energised, but it has little to offer by way of an alternative to the PTI government.

Robust auto sales

WITH car sales up in July by 105pc from July 2020 and 75pc from June 2021, government officials, who are over the moon, are claiming that the country is back on the path of rapid recovery. If the momentum is sustained going forward, the increase in car sales will significantly bolster the GDP numbers for the ongoing fiscal year. The car industry, which has seen some rough years of late on account of certain government policies and the economic slowdown, should also be delighted by this enormous jump in its sales. The unprecedented growth in July car sales is owed to a couple of factors: low interest rates for auto financing and a significant reduction in car prices through cuts in taxes announced in the budget for the present financial year. Data shows that the industry is indebted to the cheaper auto loans, which swelled by almost 46pc or Rs97bn to Rs308.1bn in

FY21, much of its growth occurring despite the pandemic, as the number of cars sold soared by 90pc from a year ago. That the sale of smaller cars has posted a much more rapid increase in July underlines the positive impact of the reduction in government taxes on the industry.

While the pick-up in car industry sales is a welcome development, it has come at a cost to consumers and the trade balance. The availability of cheaper credit and increase in the demand for cars has brought speculators or investors back into the market as is also the case with real estate, forcing consumers to pay a high premium on almost all brands. The growth in auto sales is also increasing the trade gap as per official data. Last year, imports under the transport group rose by over 93pc to \$2.99bn from \$1.54bn the previous year since most components — including hi-tech precision parts like the engine, whether imported in the form of CKD, SKD, etc. or separately — are manufactured in Japan, Korea, Thailand, China or elsewhere. Hence, we notice the rigidity in the prices of cars assembled here and the compulsion of assemblers to jack up their prices every now and then to make up for their rising import costs because of currency depreciation. With the new Automotive Industry Development and Export Policy 2021-26 expected to be announced shortly, it is imperative for the government to look into these issues to protect the interests of consumers.

Pilot licensing exams

THE Civil Aviation Authority's decision to outsource pilot licensing exams to a body in the UK is a welcome move that will hopefully restore the reputational damage that Pakistani pilots have suffered over the past year. The saga began when Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar on the floor of parliament made a sweeping statement that 40pc of the licences given to Pakistani pilots are dubious. The statement prompted various international bodies, foreign airlines and countries to impose curbs on pilots from Pakistan owing to safety concerns. All pilot licensing exams in the country, too, were halted. The minister's statement was criticised as irresponsible, as it spelt disaster for Pakistani pilots, most of whom are professional and highly skilled. By effectively tarring all of them with the same brush, the minister did a major disservice. The result is that today, in the eyes of the international community, pilots with Pakistani licences are looked at with suspicion. Pakistani pilots who were once lauded for building the core fleet of the major Middle

Eastern airlines now risk being banned or at the very least must verify their credentials.

Hence the move to approach the UK authority to give licences to Pakistani pilots should help restore trust. The CAA has admitted that there have been “some pilots” who, in connivance with CAA officials, manipulated papers to obtain licences. So, while inquiries continue and action is being taken, outsourcing licensing for two or three years to a reputable body is a very welcome decision. It is no doubt going to be a costly exercise, as foreign exchange will have to be paid to avail these licensing services, but it is a price the government must pay to build back the lost credibility of Pakistan’s aviation sector. The CAA should also use this time to improve its licensing processes and establish a corruption-free system that awards licences to pilots. Failure to do so will come not just at a reputational cost, it could also have major safety implications.

Principle of seniority

FOR the first time in the country’s history, a woman judge is set to be elevated to the Supreme Court.

Prior to this, an invisible barrier of sorts existed for women in the higher judiciary, but with the nomination to the Supreme Court of Justice Ayesha Malik, whose professional excellence has been lauded in legal circles and beyond, it appears that the judicial glass ceiling will finally be shattered.

Indeed, our judicial system should be more inclusive, and it has miles to go before it can correct the serious gender imbalances it contains. But Justice Malik’s elevation from the Lahore High Court to the top court means that she has superseded other judges. Much like the elevation of Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar of the Sindh High Court — an appointment that went against the principle of seniority and stirred controversy — Justice Malik’s appointment, too, has been questioned.

Ironically, the flouting of this principle has also prevented women from rising in the judicial ranks in the first place. Had it not been disregarded, there would have been

a woman chief justice in the Lahore High Court and a Supreme Court judge in 2002-2003. Instead, Justice Fakhrunissa Khokar was bypassed. If the principle of seniority was adhered to, Justice Malik would have made her way to the top position in the Lahore High Court and then to the Supreme Court in due course. At present, she ranks fourth in seniority at the Lahore High Court and her appointment means that a number of more senior judges from the other high courts too have been bypassed — for instance, the chief justices of the Sindh High Court and the Islamabad High Court.

It is unclear why the Judicial Commission of Pakistan has overlooked these judges, but it is evident that the process — which is designed to rule out arbitrary selections — was not followed. It reflects a similar trend that has kept the upper echelons of the judiciary out of the reach of women judges. Once again, there is no doubt that Justice Malik enjoys a fine reputation as a judge. But an out-of-turn appointment can hardly be a win for the judiciary. No doubt, merit, as we have previously noted, is the best criterion in making appointments. However for that, the process of selection must be transparent and clearly defined and uniform standards closely adhered to so that there is no room for confusion or controversy.

Cheating in exams

ONE of the defining features of a sound education system is the integrity of its examination system. Unfortunately, Pakistan fails the test: there are far too many reported instances of both students and teachers/invigilators resorting to unfair means during tests and exams. The issue often comes under the spotlight during the Matric and Intermediate examinations that are a reminder of how decrepit our education system is and how ethics are lost at a very early age. This year too, despite strict instructions from the authorities, more than 200 students were caught cheating during Intermediate examinations in Sindh. Out of these, 46 were impersonators who were taking the exam for the actual candidate. Earlier in the year, question papers for math and physics were leaked from the office of the Board of Secondary Education in Karachi just before the Matric exams were about to start. The matter is of concern and needs deeper introspection. Cheating in exams is wrong and should be unequivocally condemned as not only a dishonest representation of one's academic abilities but also as an act that robs a deserving student of the reward — perhaps a coveted spot at a higher educational institution or a scholarship — of his or her hard work.

In broader terms, such unethical practice reflects the inadequacy of the public education system itself. On the one hand, it exposes the incompetence of the examination boards that are unable to conduct a routine academic exercise in a fair manner — how can they then be trusted to take responsible and informed decisions regarding other academic matters? On the other hand, cheating is indicative of the students' own sense of insecurity with a system that does not encourage criticism and thinking minds and where children's natural curiosity is often crushed by the teachers who are themselves a product of a system where rote learning and unimaginative textbooks take precedence over inspired teaching. The authorities need to think beyond registering cases against students and work to fix the larger structural issues in education.

Growth sustainability

THE transfer of no-strings-attached funds of \$2.8bn from the IMF later this month will bolster Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves at a time when the rupee is under pressure. The new IMF dollars being credited to the lender's members from the recently approved allocation of \$650bn to boost global liquidity at a time of a disastrous pandemic will also help moderate Pakistan's requirements for expensive commercial loans to meet its financing needs this year. But if Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin wanted to send a message to the market to calm it and ease pressure on the exchange rate by making the announcement on Thursday, it didn't work. The rupee continues to be traded at the 10-month high of 164 to a dollar. It has been weakening since May when the current account deficit began to widen due to rising imports and debt repayments. The current account surplus achieved in early FY21 turned into a deficit of \$1.8bn by the end of the fiscal. The State Bank estimate of the current account gap broadening by 2pc-3pc during the ongoing financial year as the government pushes for higher GDP growth, and with the IMF programme being in 'recess' over differences on budget strategy, the market is anticipating the exchange rate to weaken further.

As previously, the economic growth momentum and industrial recovery are also being supported by imports, which were more than double the exports in the last fiscal. The trend continues, with the trade deficit ballooning by 81.4pc to over \$3bn

in July. Despite fears of renewed pressure on the foreign exchange reserves, funded over the last couple of years through expensive borrowings from commercial sources, State Bank governor Reza Baqir is confident that the present economic recovery will be accompanied by external-sector stability. He has repeatedly discounted fears of a boom-and-bust cycle making a comeback soon, saying the current account deficit should be cause for concern only if followed by a depletion in reserves, which are sufficient to support a moderate GDP expansion of 4pc-5pc. He is also not worried about the weakening exchange rate, calling it 'natural' when the current account deficit is expected to increase.

Indeed, the country's foreign exchange reserves are at a 'comfortable' level for now and the projected current account deficit for this year remains manageable, with financing needs, according to Mr Baqir, "more than fully met". Nevertheless, the rupee is expected to remain under pressure on projections of imports surging even faster than last year to meet the domestic demand for food, machinery, raw material, etc, fuelling price inflation further. The sustainability of the government's push for growth will continue to be questioned amid doubts about the medium- to long-term external-sector stability unless it is able to narrow the trade deficit — not by curbing demand but by boosting exports — and convincing foreign parties to invest heavily in this country's future.

Flooding risk

THE tragedy of two people drowning in the urban flooding witnessed in Islamabad's high-value E-11 sector a fortnight ago was an indictment of the negligent, in fact criminal, attitude of the capital's authorities. Much of the damage caused by the flooding was the result of drains having been greatly narrowed by land developers as well as encroachers. In E-11, part of the problem with city by-laws not being enforced was an exemption given to this area by former ruler Ayub Khan. Even so, in 2007, the Capital Development Authority framed by-laws; but these were applicable to high-rise buildings only — and even they were not implemented. In 2012, the property development's revised-as-built layout plan — in which the width of one drain had been reduced from some 12m to about 5m — was approved by the CDA. This, even when the then deputy director of the authority raised in writing concerns about the drain's width, only to be ignored. Meanwhile, a few days ago the Sindh High Court was seized with a petition pleading that a number of constructions that are now due to be demolished

because they restrict storm-water courses had, in fact, been built after the land was leased by the KMC and other city authorities. The leases were cancelled in 2015 and action against officials responsible for the granting of the leases was ordered, but the issue remains unresolved.

City authorities urgently need to take responsibility for their considerable culpability in haphazard construction that leads to disaster. The question really is one of who guards those who are themselves responsible for upholding the law. The Met department has issued a warning for potential urban flooding in the north over these few days; this water will eventually — and after possible destruction — make its way south. The current ad hoc attitude of the authorities is appalling — demonstrably deadly. What will it take for sense to prevail, especially in a country with growing urbanisation and facing the realities of climate change?

Silencing the media

ALL major bodies representing the media have rightly rejected the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority and termed the intended law behind it a draconian one. In a joint statement, the All Pakistan Newspapers Society, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, Pakistan Broadcasters Association, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and the Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors have criticised the law and termed it a step towards state control of all segments of the media. The media organisations have urged parliament to reject the proposed body. The government wants this single body to be solely responsible for regulating the print, electronic and digital media.

These media organisations and associations have done well to raise the red flag over the formation of this media body. The proposed law gives sweeping powers to the body to control independent media organisations through coercive measures. The federal government, through its appointed members, will exercise control over the PMDA and will be able to take punitive measures against media organisations, rendering the independence of the media redundant. If the authority is allowed to be formed, it would amount to throttling freedom of expression in Pakistan and inflicting a mortal blow on the media industry. This proposed law is illustrative of the authoritarian streak that is so pronounced in the present government and it will get weaponised through the powers accorded to the PMDA. The last few years have taken a heavy toll on the media industry both in terms of

financial and editorial pressures. These have led to painful job cuts and the shrinking of space for quality journalism. It is also an unfortunate fact that the government has displayed intolerance towards criticism and used its powers to punish media organisations and individual journalists who have been critical of its policies. If the PMDA is formed, it would enable the government to bludgeon the media into silence. It is the responsibility of parliament to see this proposed law for what it is — a naked attempt to muzzle the media — and reject it. Civil society should also raise its voice against this draconian law and help build pressure to scuttle the move. Pakistan needs more media freedom, not less, so it can help strengthen representative democracy in the country and inject greater transparency into the affairs of the state. The PMDA is a regressive move and should remain stillborn.

Afghanistan's future

AS the Afghan Taliban continue their blitzkrieg across their country, with key cities falling like ninepins, it is a foregone conclusion that the capture of Kabul — and with it the control of Afghanistan — is only a matter of time.

US intelligence reports say that Kabul may fall within 90 days. But the truth is that with their capture of Pul-i-Alam that is some 70 km from the country's capital, the insurgents are closing in on the seat of power faster than was anticipated. Even cities ruled by the hard-line militia's staunch opponents, such as Mazar-i-Sharif, are finding it tough to resist the Taliban onslaught. Therefore the international community, particularly Afghanistan's neighbours, should now be concerned about how to deal with a Taliban government in Kabul, however unpalatable it may be. And topping the global community's agenda should be questions about what the Taliban intend to do about their relations with transnational terrorist groups.

The US has taken a maximalist position in this regard, saying that if the Taliban take power by force, they shall be shunned by the global community. Yet the fact is that Kabul has always been taken by force; even after 9/11 the US installed the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan after defeating the Taliban militarily. The ideal situation would of course be what Pakistan and others are proposing: a peaceful settlement. But that does not seem likely. Although Afghan government negotiators in Doha have again extended the olive branch to the Taliban, it is unlikely the latter will entertain the matter as they have maximum advantage on the battlefield.

Indeed, much of the present chaos is the result of the abrupt American withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Kabul's inability to protect the country. The Americans — the former Trump administration and the current dispensation — have had enough of Afghanistan and, failing in their 'civilising mission', they want the 'boys' back home as quickly as possible. Pakistan has also failed to convince Kabul that it is a neutral actor, considering its past links with the Afghan Taliban. All these factors have aided the disorder that is currently unfolding in Afghanistan.

The international community must send a strong message to the Taliban: when they do take Kabul, if their country is used to host transnational terrorists, there will be consequences. After all, the Afghan Taliban have a working relationship with anti-Pakistan terrorists such as the banned TTP, and a major security nightmare may emerge if these malign actors are given an open field to operate. China has also communicated its concerns about Uighur militant groups such as the ETIM, while Al Qaeda and IS too have a large footprint in Afghanistan. Therefore, if the Taliban do not wish to see a repeat of the events of Sept 2001, they must pledge to not allow territory under their control to be used by terrorist groups against any other state in the vicinity or further off.

Undermining parliament

ROBUST parliamentary traditions are the bedrock of any mature democracy. For a country like Pakistan, where democratic norms are weak and remain under the shadow of the establishment, the institution of parliament is essential for establishing the civilian government's legitimacy in the political system and in the eyes of the public. However, the country's leaders and politicians continue to treat parliament with disdain, and end up damaging their own credibility and also endangering the overall stability of the political system. The third parliamentary year of the National Assembly drew to a close last week, amid a session that could not take up legislative business due to the constant absence of ministers and parliamentary secretaries. The session that ended on Thursday set a damaging precedent for the country's fledgling democratic traditions. It concluded without any meaningful debate on the president's address to the joint sitting of parliament. Had this constitutional requirement been fulfilled in its true spirit, there would have been a healthy discussion on a vast number of issues ranging from foreign policy to domestic policies — these might have provided a chance to smoothen over at least

a few differences that have soured the political atmosphere both inside and outside parliament.

The government bears much of the responsibility for undermining the authority of parliament. Prime Minister Imran Khan, as Leader of the House, has rarely been seen in the National Assembly, in contrast to his claims as an opposition leader that he would even attend the question hour session and be answerable to the people and to the opposition through parliament. The cabinet seems to have taken their cue from this approach and are not particular about attending sessions. However, the opposition is not without blame either. In fact, both have undermined parliament's prestige. In June, the uncouth conduct of government and opposition lawmakers made a mockery of this country's supreme lawmaking institution. How can our politicians expect the public and establishment to respect their mandate, if they don't show any respect for it themselves?

Apocalypse now

THE unthinkable has happened, and we are past the tipping point. Greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have reached levels high enough to ensure climate disruption for decades, perhaps centuries. That is among several disturbing conclusions in a major report by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which was released last week.

Based on more than 14,000 scientific studies, this is the most comprehensive report on the subject to date. There is no escaping the sordid reality of how we have come to this pass. The very first line of the report summary reads: "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land."

With the world having failed to collectively act upon the warnings issued time and again, an apocalyptic scenario is at hand. According to the report, even the most drastic cuts in greenhouse emissions are unlikely to prevent a rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial level temperatures. Weather extremes hitherto considered rare or unprecedented are happening more frequently. Asphalt-melting heatwaves that happened once every 50 years are now taking place once a decade. Several countries at present are suffering the effects of precisely such extreme weather: hundreds of wildfires are blazing ferociously in several parts of the world. There was catastrophic flooding in Germany and Belgium last month. Hundreds of lives have been lost thus far and colossal economic losses sustained.

According to the report, “Mountain and polar glaciers are committed to continue melting for decades or centuries”, threatening water scarcity and depletion of groundwater sources. Meanwhile, sea levels are also projected to keep rising for centuries, which spells doom for coastal communities.

Sea intrusion has already laid waste to millions of acres of arable land in Pakistan; unpredictable weather events here have become increasingly common; our per capita water availability is now barely above the scarcity threshold of 1,000 cubic metres.

To its credit, climate change has always been one of the PTI’s government’s key objectives, and massive tree plantation drives are among its signature projects. Inadequate forest cover — Pakistan has one of the world’s highest deforestation rates — exacerbates the effects of climate change, opening the gates to flash floods and soil erosion which lowers crop yields and disrupts food supply patterns.

Trees act as lungs for the earth, helping to cool down the atmosphere. Recently in Lahore, Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated the world’s largest Miyawaki urban forest; another 53 Miyawaki forests are already being developed in the city. The premier has pledged that 60pc of Pakistan’s energy will be clean by 2030, and the government has granted massive tax exemptions for the local manufacture of four-wheel electric vehicles.

We must also join hands on a regional level to fight back against an existential crisis that respects no borders, even if all we can do now is delay the inevitable.

A controversial report

THE recent release of the Anti-State Trends report by the digital media wing of the Ministry of Information has led to criticism of the government.

The poorly presented, typo-ridden report claims to document how Indian and Afghan social media accounts malign Pakistan, but it provides little by way of evidence or clarity. A large part of the report contains screenshots of tweets and posts following certain hashtags — including tweets which are critical of these hostile hashtags. Besides the absence of sentiment analysis, the overall report does not have the desired impact as it is bereft of evidence, doesn’t clarify research methodology and fails to explain why it was commissioned in the first place.

While it is no secret that Pakistan has been the target of misinformation and hate campaigns by accounts and organisations that serve Indian interests, this reality was proven with hard evidence and a long investigation. Most recently, the EU Disinfo Lab in its 'Indian Chronicles' uncovered a massive operation targeting Pakistan and promoting India, and did so with compelling evidence. Exposing and busting such disinformation networks is critical in a post-truth world where targeted social media campaigns influence millions and manipulate public opinion. But the way the information ministry approached the matter in this latest report is flawed. It appears to be the outcome of a preconceived notion perfunctorily 'supported' by a mass of screenshots without context. The fact that it includes the names of real Twitter users to show how certain hashtags are 'anti-state' is also of concern, as it may lead some to think that these accounts are actually what they are labelled as.

The digital media wing has a lot of work to do if it wants to create a persuasive dossier that shows how hostile countries are maligning Pakistan. It needs to consult digital and data experts, investigate the origin of tweets and analyse what their content is suggesting. A trends analysis based on a broad scan is inconclusive and can be misleading. Though the information minister referred to bots promoting these campaigns, the report has not filtered genuine social media accounts from these automated accounts. Identifying a problem or creating a theory is not enough to prove that it is fact. There are tons of experts and tools the ministry can consult and use to show a more comprehensive account of how social media is manipulated. Without a thorough, evidence-led approach, the result will be a report based on preconceived notions.

Taliban's challenge

THE swiftness with which Kabul fell to the Taliban without a shot being fired has taken the world by surprise. The Afghan Taliban now control the entire country and will dominate whatever interim government ultimately takes shape. With former president Ashraf Ghani fleeing Afghanistan, it is not clear how many of the key people who constituted his government would be acceptable to the Taliban in the new set-up.

An important delegation comprising non-Pakhtun Afghan leaders who once belonged to the Northern Alliance, held talks with Pakistani officials in Islamabad on Monday and it is expected that they would engage the Taliban to explore

avenues for joining the new government. This holds great significance because it would be in the interest of the Taliban, and of the entire Afghan leadership, to agree to a broad-based, fully representative government that can bring all ethnicities and factions together to forge a consensus on how to govern together.

It is too early to tell whether such an arrangement can take shape. However, what is fairly clear is that the Taliban, militarily victorious as they are, cannot expect to gain international credibility and recognition if they do not reach out to their former rivals. In addition, the Taliban have to also prove that they have changed since the last time they ruled Afghanistan. The global appetite for their brand of governance, marked by severe curtailment of women's rights and rampant violations of human rights, is running thin. They now control a war-ravaged country that desperately needs international assistance to subsist.

The Taliban may feel flush with their victory, but they must realise that governing Afghanistan will require more than military muscle and grit. They have done well to engage key players like the United States, China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran, but from here onwards they will also have to display a behaviour that is acceptable not just to these countries but to the international community as a whole. It is in this respect that the Taliban should waste little time in establishing a broad-based set-up and show by their actions that they respect the rights of women. The world will be keenly looking especially at how the Taliban react towards girls' education. So far the level of violence has been low. The Taliban will need to maintain this peace and calm even as they consolidate their position.

The grim images of Afghans crowding departing American aircraft at the Kabul airport, hanging on to the planes as they took off and falling to their deaths will remain etched in the world's memory for a very long time. They will continue to haunt the memory of those policymakers who believed spending \$83bn on the Afghan military would produce a force capable of withstanding the Taliban onslaught. There are sobering lessons in this for those willing to learn.

Neglect of farm sector

PUNJAB'S Kissan Card scheme is a good initiative that will help farmers, especially smallholders, directly access government subsidies for procuring seeds, fertilisers and pesticides from registered dealers. Launching this scheme in Bahawalpur last week, Prime Minister Imran Khan described the introduction of

the Kissan Card as a “turning point” in the country’s history. He also hinted at extending the initiative to other parts of the country being ruled by his PTI. It is not yet known if and when the government intends to extend the scope of the scheme to give farmers’ access to short-term collateral-free, cheaper or subsidised bank loans. Expanding the scheme’s scope will help smallholders immensely in covering the cost of cultivation, purchase of equipment, post-harvest expenses etc. It will also rid them of loan sharks who charge exorbitant rates on the loans given to farmers. Further, the extended scope can be used to provide insurance to cover crop damage sustained during natural disasters or adverse climatic impact, as well as against death or permanent disability of the cardholder. Policymakers should already be thinking along these lines. Agriculture provides livelihood to two-thirds of Pakistanis and employs 39pc of the total national labour force. Additionally, the agriculture sector, which constitutes almost a fifth of the economy, directly or indirectly, fetches almost three-quarters of the export revenue by contributing to the export of textiles, leather, rice etc. Its significance for our food security cannot be overstated either.

Nevertheless, this sector has been a picture of neglect for decades, resulting in low productivity and increased rural poverty. Sadly, initiatives introduced by successive governments to improve productivity have mostly focused on farm subsidies. No serious efforts have been made to tackle long-term issues such as deterioration in seed quality, wasteful on-farm water management, loss of soil fertility, low levels of mechanisation, farm fragmentation, unavailability of credit etc. The consequences of such policy neglect are now becoming more pronounced as falling farm productivity is forcing the government to substantially increase its food and industrial raw material imports at the expense of external-sector stability. Farm subsidies are vital to help reduce the input costs but these are not enough. Nor are these desirable for a longer period. The better way of improving crop yields and farm incomes is to address the long-standing issues afflicting the agriculture sector. The sooner we focus on these issues the better for the rural poor and the economy.

Organ donation

IT has been more than 10 years since the passage of the ethical transplantation law in the country, yet the cause has gained little traction with the public. The practise of organ donation is for some reason frowned upon by Pakistani society

even though other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran understand that organ transplantation can save lives and they allow it. In the case of cadaver donations, even if the deceased had in their lifetime wanted their organs to be donated posthumously, their families are often unwilling to fulfil this wish. The public resistance to the idea is odd, considering that religious leaders from all sects sanctioned the organ transplantation law when it was passed in 2010.

This situation is unfortunate, considering that a person dies of organ failure every few minutes in the country. Data suggests that more than 150,000 people die every year due to end-stage organ failure. Among these patients, 40,000 pass away from kidney failure, 70,000 from liver failure and 15,000 from heart failure. A large number of these lives could possibly be saved if more people were willing to donate their organs after death. So far, a little over 10,000 individuals have registered with the Transplant Society of Pakistan, which is a drop in the ocean in a country of 225m people. It is this absence of voluntary donation that propels the illegal human organ trade in the country. In fact, until some few years ago, the country was notorious for being a hub of 'transplant tourism'. Last year in September, the FIA caught members of an organ trafficking gang that had transported at least 30 people to China for illegal transplants. The authorities should take religious scholars and opinion leaders on board to launch an information campaign that aims at reducing people's hesitancy. Moreover, politicians should lead by example by declaring their organs can be used after their death and indicating as much on their identity documents. With consistent advocacy, the public will eventually see the benefits for organ donation.

Facilitating SMEs

THE new three-year State Bank refinance scheme — SME Asaan Finance — for providing collateral-free bank loans to small and medium enterprises has two objectives. One is to immediately boost the access of labour-intensive SMEs to formal credit and the other is to give the participating banks the opportunity to develop expertise and build technological infrastructure for clean lending based on the cash flows of borrowers who don't have assets to pledge as security. If the banks are able to acquire this capability, they will not need further support from the government or the central bank to expand the SME financing market after three years. Thus, the scheme is expected to boost SME access to bank financing for

investment and working capital requirements while creating a new market for the banks.

As is the case in most economies, the SME sector plays a key role in Pakistan's economy by contributing 40pc to the nation's GDP and 25pc to its annual export earnings. However, the businesses' access to credit is constrained by a number of factors such as higher loan losses, high-cost bank finance models, low usage of technology and the lack of collateral for security. This impedes their growth and ability to become bigger. The banks' lack of capability to assess financing needs and the repayment capacity of the SMEs on the basis of their cash flows is, however, the most important factor preventing the banks from tapping this important market. Hence, SME credit remains as low as 6.6pc or Rs443.8bn of the total private sector credit. If the SME Asaan Finance initiative manages to achieve its objectives, it will provide a big growth impetus to the economy and generate vast employment opportunities. Given the experience of microfinance banks in clean lending based on the daily cash flows of their customers, it is imperative for the government and the State Bank to also involve them in this initiative. The commercial banks could learn a lot from their smaller peers.

Price of US follies

US PRESIDENT Joe Biden has made a futile attempt to paint his Afghanistan policy as a success by arguing that America had not gone into the war 20 years ago for nation-building. In a speech that came after a deluge of criticism on the humiliating withdrawal of US personnel from Kabul in the wake of the Taliban takeover of the capital, Biden laid the blame for the fall of Afghanistan on the regime of Ashraf Ghani. This may not be entirely true.

Two decades and more than a trillion dollars later, the US has handed over Afghanistan to the same people it had ousted to take control. All the American investment in propping up the Kabul regime, backed by a 300,000-strong fully equipped and US-trained army, came to naught within a week of the Taliban's lightning offensive. Had the Americans not been so aghast at the way their Afghan project collapsed like a house of cards, they would have experienced a feeling of déjà vu. After all, they had faced a similar humiliation in Vietnam decades ago, and in various other military misadventures they have stumbled into ever since.

One thing common between all these global interventions, it seems, is the spectacular failures in which they have ended, and the dangerous instability they have spawned in their wake. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, just to name a recent few, have bled in all respects as a result of America's misplaced interventions. The birth of terror organisations like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda are by-products of America's ideologically fuelled policies. Entire regions, and not just countries, have paid a steep price for these US follies.

America's failure in Afghanistan is a reminder — if yet another one was needed — that nation-building cannot be imposed from above, like the US has repeatedly attempted to do, and progress cannot sprout through the barrel of a gun. Try as the Americans might, it is difficult to gloss over the harsh reality that they — and not their puppet regime in Kabul — are primarily responsible for losing the war in Afghanistan. It is a lesson hard to digest for a superpower held hostage by its own hubris, but digest it, it must, if not for its own sake then for the sake of the world that cannot bear the burden of more such reckless military interventions. It is in fact an opportune time for Washington to indulge in some soul searching and figure out which part of its policy DNA is propelling it into such Herculean misadventures. The American voter too must ask hard questions from its leaders, and demand answers that might not be easily forthcoming. Those American officials from successive administrations who contributed to this two-decade-long folly have a lot to answer for. The United States of America, for once, should hold itself to account.

Grotesque stunt

EVEN by the standards of the megalomaniacal Narendra Modi, it was an astonishingly ill-timed publicity stunt. A few days before Aug 14, Pakistan's Independence Day, the Indian prime minister took to Twitter to make an extremely controversial declaration: "Millions of our sisters and brothers were displaced and many lost their lives due to mindless hate and violence. In memory of the struggles and sacrifices of our people, August 14 will be observed as Partition Horrors Remembrance Day." His announcement was later notified by the Indian government. Given the depredations that have on his watch repeatedly befallen members of minority faiths in India, Mr Modi can scarcely claim to 'mourn' faith-based violence. How can one forget the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 — in which close to 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were massacred — while he was chief minister

of that state? Consider, since he became prime minister, the increasingly menacing atmosphere spreading throughout India towards those belonging to the minority communities, particularly Muslims. Hundreds have been killed in inter-communal riots and ‘cow lynchings’ in our neighbouring country precisely due to the “mindless hate and violence” that the BJP-RSS combine has stoked in society. The situation in India-held Kashmir is also the very embodiment of intolerance towards an entire people, and utter contempt for their legitimate aspirations which the Indian state is attempting to snuff out through brute force. The Pakistan Foreign Office rightly issued a strongly worded rejoinder, saying it was shameful that purveyors of hate and violence “would so hypocritically and one-sidedly invoke the tragic events and mass migration that occurred in the wake of independence in 1947”.

Mr Modi’s statement also amounts to unnecessary provocation at a time when the regional situation, given the turmoil in Afghanistan, is exceedingly volatile. That said, after 74 years of ‘one step forward and two steps back’ — and even this was only possible when they were not engaged in outright war or quasi military conflict against each other — Pakistan and India need to work towards a better relationship. Instead, the Indian prime minister has opted for a grotesquely self-serving reference to history with a focus on his political interests by appealing to his Hindutva base and also by blaming the Nehruvian legacy of the Congress leadership whose forebears oversaw the events of 1947. The fact is that on this side of the border, nothing has done more to convince sceptics of the justification for India’s partition than the actions of the Modi government.

Horrific assault

A VIDEO of a woman being assaulted by a crowd of men during Independence Day celebrations near Minar-i-Pakistan has shaken citizens to the core. Clips of the incident, now viral on social media, are unbearable to watch. The woman is assaulted, manhandled and groped by scores of men, with some unabashedly filming the crime. The men are brazen and ruthless. The complainant says she was attacked by nearly 400 men, some of whom scaled the enclosures to attack her and rip her clothes off.

The episode has proved a trigger for many women who described on social media how they themselves were assaulted or how they feared they would sooner or later

face a similar situation. The trauma and anger among the women is palpable. This incident rubs salt in the deep wounds inflicted by the misogyny rampant in our country — the toxic mentality that allows for repeated assaults, victim-blaming and gaslighting of women. A case has been registered by the Lahore police against hundreds of men, with officials saying the video footage of the attack will help authorities track down the culprits. But bringing these perpetrators to justice is just one part of the solution. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done to correct the public narrative around women's rights.

Read: The mob assault near Minar-i-Pakistan and why 'Mera Jism, Meri Marzi' matters more than ever

All too often, the country is gripped with horror as gruesome crimes against women make national news. While the thorough investigation of these cases is very important, it must be supported by unambiguous messaging by members of our government that such actions will be punished. Key officials must use their platforms not only to strongly condemn violence against women, but also to actively set the tone for women's rights and opinion to be respected.

They must repeatedly and at every forum say that threats and harassment directed at women will not be tolerated, and then match these statements with action against the offenders. Unless the judicial process is supported by such a robust campaign, the environment that enables such crimes against women to take place will continue. But more needs to be done also at a subliminal level in the classrooms across this country when young Pakistanis are forming ideas about the world, and about the place of women in it. Respect for women is not conditional, and they are in the public sphere by right, not on the sufferance of the men in this country.

Decreasing FDI flows

THE consistent decline in FDI flows into Pakistan in recent years should worry our economic managers. The net flows fell by just under 39pc year-on-year in July in continuation of the trend witnessed last fiscal when long-term, non-debt-creating investments plummeted by 29pc to \$1.85bn from the previous year. State Bank data for the last four years shows that inward FDI flows are either plunging or stagnating while outward flows have surged over time. Hence, FDI stocks have declined from \$41.9bn to \$35.6bn in five years from 2016 to 2020. With rising fears

of the impact of the Afghan situation on Pakistan, net FDI flows are expected to shrink further. The rise in Pakistan bond yields soon after the collapse of the government in Kabul indicates the loss of global investors' confidence in the economy. Pakistan may also face reduction in its export revenues if the instability and uncertainty in Afghanistan linger.

FDI is crucial as it helps technology and skill transfer, improves business management practices, lifts exports and the economic growth of host nations, and creates jobs. These inflows are more important for countries like Pakistan facing balance-of-payments problems to cut their reliance on expensive foreign debt so they can finance their imports and build reserves. Hence, we see countries offering a slew of tax, regulatory and other concessions to attract foreign investors. Somehow Pakistan has never been able to inspire foreign investors because of frequent changes in policies, lack of rule of law, poor security conditions, political instability, macroeconomic troubles, etc. While FDI in South Asia spiked by 20pc to \$71bn in 2020 despite Covid-19, Pakistan saw these flows come down sharply to less than 0.75pc of its GDP. FDI flows to India rose by 27pc to \$64bn in various sectors of its economy during the same year. Indonesia and Vietnam received FDI flows of \$18.6bn and \$15.8bn. With the government piling up foreign debt and the share of short-term expensive borrowings growing rapidly, and exports slow to grow, it is time policymakers addressed the reasons pushing investors away.

Militancy concerns

HAVING made their way to Kabul like a hot knife through butter, the Afghan Taliban are saying all the right things to a world jittery about the possibility of Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for transnational Islamist groups.

In his first news conference on Tuesday, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid declared they would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a launching pad to attack other countries. This pledge was part of the peace deal signed by the Taliban and the Trump administration in 2020 which was the prelude to the US withdrawal. And the world will be watching very closely to see if the victorious Afghan insurgents follow through.

There are two main points of concern here. Are the Taliban sincere in their assurances, and is it possible for them to keep transnational terrorists in check?

In the face of impending US military action after 9/11, Mullah Omar, despite his close ties with Osama bin Laden — whose financial support and foreign fighters had helped bring most of Afghanistan under Taliban control — wanted his Arab guest to leave. Ultimately though, he opted to not force bin Laden's departure. That decision had profound, long-term consequences for the then Taliban government.

Twenty years later, the present crop of Taliban leaders may be more pragmatic. They know they need international aid to rebuild their war-wracked country, whose internal dissensions will otherwise ensure perpetual instability and chaos. However, over the years, Afghanistan's militancy landscape has become more complex, reflecting shifting patterns in the wider arena of extremist violence. It is a Gordian knot that will be diabolically difficult to unravel.

According to a recent UNSC report, Al Qaeda is present in at least 15 Afghan provinces; in some of them, it "operates under Taliban protection". Meanwhile, the banned TTP has long enjoyed sanctuaries along Afghanistan's border areas after being pushed out of Pakistan by military campaigns in Swat and the tribal districts. With the unification in 2020 of several splinter groups, overseen by Al Qaeda, the TTP is enjoying a resurgence manifested in increasing cross-border attacks into Pakistan. As per the UNSC report, IS, after a battering at the hands of the Taliban and the Afghan and US forces in Kunar and Nangarhar last year, has dispersed to other provinces and formed sleeper cells there. It is also feared that IS may be able to attract fighters from conflict zones in the Middle East. Last but not least, there also remain pockets of Uighur and Uzbek militants in Afghanistan.

The world, besides keeping up the pressure on the next Afghan government, must help it address the issue of militancy. Given that all the major players in the tragedy of Afghanistan — from the US to Pakistan — have played a role in seeding and enabling extremist violence in that country, it is incumbent upon them to do so.

Inter-sect tolerance

FOR some years now, the first 10 days of Muharram have been a relatively violence-free period — a marked difference from a decade ago when processions would be attacked by terrorists and result in mass casualties. Still, although the authorities have managed to improve security at this religious event through a crackdown on militancy, divisions and hatred have not gone away. The deadly attack on an Ashura procession in Bahawalnagar this week left at least two dead

and several injured. The attack took place despite mobile phone networks being jammed, an extreme security measure taken for years by the authorities to disrupt communication channels between terrorists and also to limit the possibility of bomb detonation via a mobile device. Some of the roads leading up to the procession, too, were blocked to thwart a terror incident. Still, the attacker apparently managed to find his way to the procession and hurl a hand grenade.

This attack is a reminder that counterterrorism agencies cannot afford to let their guard down even for a moment, while the government for its part must intensify efforts to promote inter-sect harmony. Violence against Shias, especially the country's Hazara community, has been relentless, and is born from deep-rooted intolerance and hatred. Unfortunately, in the past violent sectarian groups allegedly enjoyed the patronage of some elements in the state. These rabid groups should not be allowed to spew their venom at any cost. Just last year, three massive anti-Shia rallies were staged in Karachi where takfiri slogans were raised. One of them included speakers from the banned ASWJ. Under no circumstances should such anti-Shia groups be allowed to gather and propagate their violent ideology. Their activities fly in the face of the National Action Plan, under which years ago the authorities pledged to declare a 'war against sectarianism' as well as those aiding and abetting such actions. The government and agencies must be vigilant in dismantling not just these sectarian terror groups but also monitor and shut down sectarian hate speech.

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Hard times

POLICYMAKERS and economists tend to look at inflation, the pace at which everyday prices of goods and services increase, as mere numbers. Seen through this lens the headline CPI food price inflation has been on the decrease for the last several months. It has come down from its peak of above 15pc in April to 8.6pc in July. On a year-on-year basis, it is down from 16.2pc from a year ago. If we go a little beyond, food inflation has slowed down considerably from the 10-year high of 21.2pc in January 2020. But for ordinary people, inflation — food and non-food — is not just another number; it is something that makes it hard for them to put food on the table and send their children to school. So they remain unimpressed when the government tries to shift the blame for rising domestic prices to an escalation in global commodity markets because of Covid-19 or some other factor. It is, after all, the government's primary job to ensure that all citizens are able to access basic food at affordable prices.

A report in this newspaper the other day had highlighted the plight of the poor-middle-income groups because of the failure of the government to effectively check the prices of essential food items such as vegetables, pulses, milk, sugar, edible oil, wheat flour, etc. The increase in the prices of staples places a massive burden on low-income households which are estimated to spend more than half their income on food. Soaring price inflation has drastically eroded the purchasing power of the common man amid widespread job losses, and negative wage growth

because of debatable economic stabilisation policies and the impact of Covid-19. Even though the economy is bouncing back and has posted a modest growth, its benefits are yet to trickle down to the low-middle classes. Although the government is trying to help people through cash disbursements to the poorest segments, improving the supply of staples through imports and passing on only the partial impact of the hike in global commodity prices to consumers, food inflation continues to tax and test the pain threshold of the majority.

Ineffective market governance, frequent disruption in supply chains, and profiteering by investors and hoarders are a few problems that the decision-makers need to address intelligently on an urgent basis to mitigate the impact of the surging food prices. These areas are the responsibility of the provinces and it is no secret that the provincial governments have utterly failed to fulfil their obligations. We have been hearing the provinces complaining about the absence of a legal framework to arrest and punish profiteers and hoarders for the last many years. But none of them has thought of legislating to develop this framework. Why? The question is not difficult to answer.

Anti-Taliban protests

WITH the reality of the Taliban's lightning takeover of Afghanistan slowly sinking in, the international community is now confronted with the more sobering job of deciding whether or not to recognise the hard-line militia's rule, especially in the light of emerging reports of the Taliban putting down dissent.

While initially things were quiet as the Taliban marched into Kabul on Sunday, there is now agitation against the armed movement in some cities. People have taken to the streets in Asadabad, Jalalabad as well as Kabul, with several deaths reported from Asadabad as the Taliban apparently fired into a crowd. Moreover, Amnesty International has said that the Taliban "massacred" members of the Hazara community in Ghazni in July. While the 'new' Taliban have promised an inclusive set-up, including guarantees of women's rights as per "Islamic norms", the aforementioned incidents very much remind one of the actions of the 'old' Taliban — a group that was mostly isolated from the world community and feared by its own people due to its obscurantist interpretation of religion.

The Afghan Taliban's honeymoon period may not last long. There are many who suspect the group's intentions despite their reassurances. The fact is that the

Taliban can talk all they want about inclusivity, but whether or not they will abide by their promises will become evident over the next few days and weeks.

Firstly, holding peaceful protests and assemblies is a fundamental right that the Taliban cannot take away from the Afghan people. Instead of crushing dissent, the Taliban must engage Afghan citizens in a democratic exercise — using tribal and other channels — to assure them that this time around things in the country will be different. Moreover, if further reports emerge of Taliban excesses against the Hazara community and other ethnic, linguistic and confessional groups, whatever goodwill the Taliban may have earned over the past few days will disappear quickly. There are also reports of the Taliban going door to door to hunt down those who worked for the erstwhile Afghan dispensation. This flies in the face of the amnesty the Taliban had declared.

The Taliban need to take along all groups in the country if they are sincere in wanting to end the bloodshed. Otherwise, Afghanistan's never-ending war will continue, and the Taliban's claims of wanting an inclusive country will be exposed as mere political manoeuvring. The Taliban must prove that this time around they will preside over a representative system, not a dictatorship.

Falling Covid numbers

CONFIRMED Covid-19 cases in the country appear to be falling, but it is no time to be complacent. Daily cases have reportedly decreased by 30pc since the peak on June 17, when the country reported the highest daily average. The national positivity ratio came down to around 6pc this week, but it remains to be seen how infections have spread during Muharram, especially the first 10 days, when mourners in their thousands gathered both inside imambargahs and for Ashura processions. Mass gatherings of this nature can cause the virus to spread rapidly due to the close proximity of people, many without face coverings. The authorities must remain vigilant about monitoring cases, hospitalisations and infection spread to ensure that swift action is taken in case there is another peak. If Pakistan is able to avoid a high number of critically ill patients and an overwhelmed healthcare system, resources must be directed towards understanding what factors prevented an all-out outbreak. This data is critical, as it will enable the authorities to explain to the public that there is no miracle immunity but factual reasons behind the rise and fall in infection rates. As the authorities observe the post-Muharram virus

trend, it is vital that the government to ramp up vaccinations, increase mass testing and spread awareness about SOPs.

While attention is given to monitoring, data gathering and vaccine availability, healthcare workers must not be forgotten. In the last year and a half of the pandemic, doctors, nurses and hospital staff have made incredible sacrifices to treat patients and provide care. Despite being vulnerable to infections themselves, front-line workers have shown up and fulfilled their responsibilities with incredible stoicism. It is therefore important to reward, protect and support them. The fact that the Corona Experts Advisory Group is proposing a booster dose of the Covid-19 vaccine for fully vaccinated healthcare workers in hospitals because of their exposure to the infection is a welcome move. Data shows that despite double vaccinations, reinfection is a serious possibility — especially as healthcare workers are exposed to high viral loads. The federal government's initiative to launch MyCare, an app that will provide mental health support to healthcare workers, too, is a laudable effort. By evaluating their stress condition and connecting them with health professionals, this platform, if built comprehensively, can provide some relief to the front-line heroes that have gone beyond the call of duty to provide care and therapy to patients.

Intimidating the press

THE Supreme Court of Pakistan has summoned senior officials from the interior ministry, FIA and the Islamabad Police to hear their version about complaints regarding the harassment of journalists. The court issued these summons in response to a petition complaining that journalists were facing increasing cases of intimidation at the hands of security agencies. The court order also made a reference to a press release issued by the FIA stating that criminal cases had been registered against some journalists because they had reported against the judiciary. "The press release creates an impression as if criminal cases were registered at the behest of the judiciary, and in doing so it portrays the judiciary to be inimical to the guaranteed fundamental right of a free press," the court order regretted. The Supreme Court's taking up the petition comes at an opportune time. While the cases of intimidation of journalists are on the rise, the federal government plans to go ahead with a controversial media regulatory authority whose aim appears to be to further throttle the freedom of expression.

The last few years have seen heightened pressure on media organisations as a whole as well as on individual journalists. The financial and editorial squeeze has had an adverse impact on the industry and also diluted the quality of independent journalism. A large number of journalists have lost their jobs while others have had to endure salary cuts. There have been numerous cases of physical assaults on journalists and hardly any of the perpetrators have been caught by the law-enforcement authorities. For the discerning observer, it is not difficult to recognise a distinct pattern. There is a deliberate and well-considered effort by the authorities to bring the media to heel and curtail space for criticism. All this flies in the face of constitutional guarantees for the freedom of expression. Representative media bodies have done well to reject the proposed regulatory body and they must not back down from this principled position in the face of growing pressure from the information ministry.

The Supreme Court's timely move in the matter of harassment and intimidation of journalists by security agencies will bring welcome relief to the media industry as a whole. The government must realise that it is harming democracy by resorting to such tactics to browbeat the media. The hearings in the court that will take place soon will allow for all these issues to come to the fore so that the highest court in the land remains cognisant of how the government's actions may be violating the constitutional rights of the media. Prime Minister Imran Khan, who claims to support the media's right to independence, must take note of his information minister's misguided attempt to gag the media. The court should also take notice of these developments and ask the government to explain the rationale behind the proposed body.

Afghan Taliban flags

AS the Afghan Taliban solidify their grip on power, valid questions have emerged about how the movement's taking of Kabul will impact associated groups in Pakistan. After all, the Taliban have a number of ideological fellow travellers in this country, including jihadi and sectarian outfits, who are overjoyed by the Afghan group's victory.

One recent incident in the federal capital illustrates that this nexus must be closely watched by the security apparatus to prevent Talibanisation in Pakistan. According to reports, the Afghan Taliban's white flags were raised from Jamia Hafsa recently

— a seminary associated with Islamabad’s infamous Lal Masjid and its militant clerics. The madressah’s administration claims “some students” were behind the stunt; the banners were taken down the same day.

While the Islamabad incident might be small when compared to the greater geopolitical game being played in Afghanistan, for Pakistan’s own security the state cannot let its guard down. After all, many pro-Afghan Taliban elements in this country may seek to import the form of governance taking shape in Pakistan’s western neighbour by attempting to create ‘emirates’ within the state. The Lal Masjid episode — as well as the rise of the TTP in the erstwhile tribal areas — proves that hard-line elements here have the intention to replace the constitutional order with an obscurantist dispensation, and the Taliban victory has only put the wind back in their sails.

For their part, the Afghan Taliban must stick to their promise that their country will not be used to host malign actors targeting other states, as was the case during their earlier rule. In this regard, the government’s call that the new administration in Kabul take action against the TTP must be heeded positively. While the Afghan ‘jihad’ played a major role in radicalising Pakistani society, and extremist groups found a safe haven during the Taliban’s earlier stint in power, new efforts to recreate the Taliban model locally must be resisted. Pakistan has suffered greatly due to religiously inspired militancy and cannot afford a new wave of terrorism.

Demotion to zoo status

AS reported by this newspaper recently, the Punjab Forest, Wildlife and Fisheries Department has demoted to the status of zoos four erstwhile wildlife sanctuaries: the Loi Bher and Murree enclaves in the Islamabad/ Rawalpindi area, and one each in Bahawalnagar and Vehari. Certainly, there is sense in not continuing to throw good money after bad, so to speak, especially where the welfare of living beings is concerned. All four sanctuaries are in an extremely sad state of degradation, lacking proper facilities and protection for the animals, to say nothing of the absence of visitors. Referring to the Loi Bher and Murree sanctuaries in particular, the notification pointed out the dilapidated infrastructure and absence of water sources, insufficient staff, cages in an advanced state of disrepair (though wildlife parks ought not to have caged animals at all), and sparse numbers of

animals and birds. Efforts have been made to improve these facilities, including the possibility of public-private partnerships, but to no avail.

In fact, it is worth asking whether zoos should be maintained at all in this country. The authorities are unable to properly care for the creatures entrusted to them, and not capable of attracting enough visitors to make the projects worthy. It was for these very reasons that the Islamabad High Court ordered the closure of the city's Marghzar Zoo last year. That said, however, it is vital that the forestry department be fully aware of the very fine line it treads. Both the Loi Bher and Murree enclosures are large nature preserves in areas where land for development is increasingly scarce — and expensive. The former, for example, is abutted by the high-density Korang Town and other developments. There is already reason to worry about encroachments or land takeovers. The demotion of these parks must not pave the way for the eventual eradication of these reserves in favour of pecuniary concerns coupled with land shortages — especially not on the watch of a government that claims it has made environmental concerns a priority.

Misogynistic narrative

TO be a victim of gender-based violence in this country is to be violated over and over again. From far too many fellow Pakistanis — mostly male but not exclusively so — such a woman will not find support, but censure that will compound her trauma. Instead of empathy, she will encounter sexist slurs that will intensify her humiliation.

This ugly pattern of victim-blaming is playing out yet again in the horrifying case of the female TikTokker assaulted by hundreds of men on Independence Day at the Minar-i-Pakistan in Lahore. An FIR was filed against nearly 400 men; among the charges is “assault or use of criminal force against woman and stripping her of her clothes”. The videos of the attack that flooded social media show the men crowding around her, pawing at her, throwing her into the air — it is unbearable to watch. And yet society has found ways to blame the victim; indeed, some have even accused her of ‘staging a drama’ for publicity, a willing pawn in her own degradation. It beggars belief.

The fact is, case after case of violence against women has laid bare the frightening extent of misogyny to be found in society. Even Noor Mukaddam, who was tortured, stabbed to death and beheaded last month, has been shown no mercy

by this self-righteous brigade that has resorted to specious moral arguments to somehow put the onus on her for her terrible fate.

Victim-blaming is of course not exclusive to Pakistan, but in patriarchal societies with their restrictive norms for women, it acquires a more menacing quality. A female is seen as vulnerable and weak but also culpable by default, responsible for 'enticing' or 'provoking' men. All manner of warped reasoning is employed to support that position. Law-enforcement authorities also display such bias, for after all they too are products of this environment. In September 2020, after a woman was gang-raped in front of her children on the Lahore-Sialkot Motorway, the Lahore city police chief repeatedly implied that she was partly to blame for not taking a busier road at that time of night, travelling without her husband's permission, etc.

In the recent Aug 14 incident, a number of arrests have been made, with the government vowing that more suspects will be taken into custody. One hopes the perpetrators are meted out the exemplary punishment they deserve. However, nothing will change in the long run. This country will remain unsafe for women, and gender-based violence will continue to be massively underreported because victims do not want to risk being pilloried in the court of public opinion.

Pakistani society has a problem; it needs to acknowledge it. But there are also many who are outraged and sickened by what they see around them. Their voices must be heeded, and the state should take the lead in changing a deeply misogynistic narrative.

Evading taxes

FINANCE MINISTER Shaukat Tarin has once again sought to reassure the country's business community that the tax notices sent to businesspeople will be rescinded, and new measures enforced to put an end to harassment of taxpayers by FBR field officials. He told businessmen in Karachi that the government planned to enhance its tax revenues by implementing the universal tax assessment scheme and that in future, notices would be issued only by third-party auditors after due diligence. Nevertheless, he said there would be harsh punishments, including arrests, for tax dodgers. The harassment of honest taxpayers is unjustified and intolerable. But there is frequently a very thin, blurry line that separates harassment from tax-enforcement actions. While our tax collectors often use this grey area to

put excessive pressure on taxpayers, many in the business community and other powerful groups exploit it to avoid payment of their actual taxes. How can notices served by the FBR asking non-filers to pay their taxes and file their returns be categorised by anyone as an act of harassment? A couple of months ago, a senior FBR official had apprised a parliamentary panel that only 10pc of the nearly 13m people who have been served tax notices in the last three years had responded and had started to file their returns. The rest of them did not even bother to explain the reasons why they were not required to pay taxes or file income tax returns — simply because they were not expecting any action or believed that they could get away with their noncompliance by greasing the palms of corrupt taxmen.

If harassment by corrupt FBR officials is unacceptable, so is widespread tax evasion by the wealthy and powerful. It is not for the first time that a government is putting its faith in the universal self-assessment scheme for mobilising tax resources to run state affairs. However, past experience shows that the effort is unlikely to bear fruit unless the government extensively employs modern technology to lessen the discretion of tax assessors and collectors, simplify and reduce taxes, improve complaint-resolution mechanisms and punish tax dodgers as well as officials found guilty of badgering and bullying honest taxpayers. At the same time, the business community should realise that it is their unwillingness to pay taxes that creates space for corruption and what they call harassment by FBR officials.

Fractured opposition

THE PML-N has thrown the challenge of formulating a no-confidence motion in the Senate to the PPP. The PML-N is 'asking' the latter for support in getting rid of the Senate chairman through a no-confidence vote. It has said that in return, if the move proves successful, it will support the PPP in a similar vote in the Punjab Assembly where the latter party has just six seats. One is not sure of how genuine the offer is — or whether it is simply an exercise in sarcasm, underscoring yet again the mistrust and widening chasm between the two main opposition parties. If, however, the PPP were to take it at face value, an attempt might be made to revive the joint opposition. Going by recent tensions though this may not be the case. Both parties have drifted far apart since the days of a united PDM movement, when party scions shared a stage and delivered searing remarks against the

government and its alleged selectors. With the PPP distancing itself from the PDM, the opposition coalition is today a ghost of its former self.

There are a number of common grievances the two harbour against the PTI rulers, including electoral reforms and the government's political persecution of opponents. But both have other challenges too. The PPP leadership is guarding its own interests, hoping to get some breathing space in the dozens of cases instituted against its key people. It has also kept its criticism of the rulers measured to ensure there is room for political space in the future. The PML-N, meanwhile, is in the midst of a prolonged identity crisis, with Maryam Nawaz having taken a back seat since Shahbaz Sharif was released from custody. Though the two appear cordial, there are obvious, irreconcilable political differences between them which have diluted the message of the party. Far from the days when Ms Nawaz thundered at the government at mammoth rallies, the PML-N is now a much more muted and almost demure opposition party. In the absence of Nawaz Sharif, it appears his brother will prevail. But the latter's presence isn't putting much of a sting in the party's challenge to the government.

With these problems, it is fairly certain that the PPP and PML-N will go their own ways. One is trying to survive and the other is on the wane. If this continues, the opposition will not be able to put up a robust front against any controversial move the government makes. From foreign policy to the economic situation, there are several issues the opposition could have jointly criticised in recent weeks. But it has failed to pack a punch and pull itself together as a formidable force. Both parties have a lot of work to do before they can come up with concrete proposals to challenge the seat of power. They will have to walk the talk.

Anti-China attacks

THE uptick in attacks targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan must not be taken lightly by the government and the security apparatus. Firm steps are needed to prevent such incidents from recurring. The latest incident occurred in Gwadar as a motorcade carrying Chinese nationals was attacked on Friday on the East-Bay Expressway. Some local children were killed in the act of terrorism, while a Chinese individual was injured.

Earlier, Chinese citizens had been attacked elsewhere in the country, including in Karachi late last month, and earlier in the horrific Dasu incident in the middle of

July, in which a number of Chinese nationals were killed. Clearly, efforts are afoot by hostile actors to damage the Pakistan-China relationship, specifically the flagship CPEC project, by targeting China's citizens in Pakistan. While the Pakistan-China relationship is deep and multifaceted, China has issued a strongly worded statement in the aftermath of the Gwadar incident. The Chinese embassy in Islamabad has asked Pakistan "to take practical and effective measures" to prevent such incidents in the future and to "conduct a thorough investigation".

Moreover, the Chinese ambassador, Nong Rong, met Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid on Sunday and called on Pakistan to provide "stronger security protocol" to nationals of his country. It should be recalled that after the Dasu incident, both the foreign minister and the army chief had to assure Chinese officials that Pakistan would do all it could to bring the perpetrators to justice.

With the fall of Kabul and the security situation in Afghanistan incredibly fluid, Pakistan must remain on its toes where security threats are concerned. While the threat from religiously motivated militants having sanctuaries in Afghanistan is very real, Baloch separatists also operate out of Pakistan's western neighbour. The banned Baloch Liberation Army claimed it had carried out the Gwadar attack. Therefore, Pakistan must make it clear to the new set-up in Kabul that it is their responsibility to act against all elements working against this country on their soil. Domestically, intelligence-based operations need to be carried out to neutralise cells that are looking to harm Chinese nationals and interests in this country. Some states in the region that do not want to see Pakistan-China ties prosper will be ready to take advantage of the changing geopolitical situation in the area. Their efforts must be thwarted by the security apparatus so that foreign nationals can work here in a secure and peaceful environment.

Crisis in football

It was a quirky coincidence that the latest edition of the Pakistan Premier Football League kicked off on Independence Day, alongside the start of major leagues across Europe. But while domestic seasons in Europe marked the resumption of club competitions just three months after the last editions were completed, the PPFL is being held for the first time in two-and-a-half years, the country's top tier league — along with the game in general — having suffered badly due to infighting in the Pakistan Football Federation. And while the players and teams gleefully

welcomed the long-awaited return of the PPFL, they very well know that this season won't be recognised by FIFA as it is being held by a court-elected PFF body which the global football body doesn't accept. Pakistan was suspended by FIFA after the PFF of Ashfaq Hussain Shah, which came to power after an election held by the Supreme Court, seized control of the PFF headquarters in March from the Normalisation Committee appointed by FIFA to put football back on track in the country. Mr Shah's PFF had initially handed over control of the headquarters to the NC upon its initial appointment in September 2019. It cites the NC's failure to hold fresh elections during its 18-month tenure as the reason for taking over control. NC members continue to hold talks with the government to free the headquarters but the general feeling remains that the latter's hands are tied.

The crisis has also been exacerbated by FIFA seeking nominations from the warring groups of the PFF for NC members instead of selecting neutral ones and further appointing a chairman with commercial interests in Pakistan football. FIFA and the government will have to work together if the country's long-standing football issues are to be resolved. Otherwise, while the players will continue to suffer, another generation of football fans in the country will grow up following leagues across Europe and never having the joy of supporting a local team or watching their own stars in action.

Optimistic outlook?

BUSINESS confidence in the country's economy has rebounded to levels last seen before the 2018 elections. The bounce-back in the Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry's latest Business Confidence Index is no doubt good news as it indicates an across-the-board upswing in business confidence from an 11-year low touched in June last year when a national lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19 disrupted economic activity and trade.

The increase in business confidence was mainly driven in the last one year by negative interest rates and a massive monetary stimulus announced by the State Bank to shield businesses and the economy from the pandemic's negative impact. An unprecedented tax amnesty given to tax evaders and the prime minister's construction package for injecting liquidity in the housing and real estate sector for early economic recovery also played a big part in boosting investor confidence. More recently, business-friendly policies and a large fiscal stimulus announced in

the last budget to rapidly grow the economy ahead of the 2023 polls have also contributed to increased confidence.

While improvement in business sentiments is a welcome development, investors are still flagging uncertainties such as the unrest in Afghanistan, exchange rate fluctuations, high inflation, the current account deficit, the future of the IMF programme and Covid-19's resurgence as putting pressure on the business environment going forward. The optimism reflected by the index is mostly fuelled by positive perceptions of economic recovery and growth in the short term owing to the pro-growth policies being pursued by the government and State Bank. Although many investors are planning to expand their operations through capital investment in their respective businesses, even the slightest change in the macroeconomic environment or monetary and fiscal policies could see them roll back their plans.

What will happen if inflation continues to rise, the currency depreciates, and fiscal and current account deficits expand beyond present estimates? Until now, the low interest rates have helped businesses offset the impact of a high inflation and weak exchange rate. But the central bank cannot keep the rates in negative territory for very long. Nor can the government continue to spend its way to growth.

The survey result shows a bigger turnaround in the confidence of foreign investors operating in the country. Yet new private foreign investment flows into Pakistan are falling in spite of a 20pc rise in FDI in South Asia last year. What may happen in the coming months will largely hinge on the ability of businesses to keep rebounding without the assistance of the government and central bank since the ongoing economic recovery is closely linked to lax fiscal and monetary policies.

While policymakers should use the opportunity afforded by the 'current economic boom' to address structural issues in the economy by implementing financial and governance reforms, businesses need to learn to sustain themselves without the government help.

Death over life

MORE distressing numbers have emerged on that most extreme repudiation of the human instinct for survival — the act of suicide. A report launched on Monday

revealed that a large majority — no less than 60pc — of the suicides in Tharparkar district in 2020 were committed by individuals between 10 and 20 years of age; of these, 48pc were 16 years old or younger. The report, steered by the Sindh Mental Health Authority with technical help from some of the country's top psychiatrists and mental health institutions, is the outcome of a 'psychological autopsy', which is an attempt to understand the factors leading to the act of taking one's own life. According to the findings, based on interviews of family members, 24pc of the suicide victims were already suffering from mental illness of some kind; 36pc had exhibited suicidal ideation. Of the 33 cases analysed, women were victims in 21 and men in 12. Young people committing suicide points to parental discord, identity problems, bullying etc — problems that could have benefited from counselling, but were tragically left unresolved until too late. Another significant finding is the high ratio of female-to-male victims, quite contrary to the global pattern, which indicates the pressures that women in patriarchal societies deal with, and are sometimes defeated by.

Suicide is considered a growing problem not only in Sindh but all over the country. Between 2012 and 2016, the rate of suicide in Pakistan is estimated by WHO to have increased from 2.9 per 100,000 to 7.5 per 100,000 people. Verifiable figures are difficult to come by because the stigma surrounding the act means that completed and attempted suicides are both vastly underreported. Compounding the sociocultural hurdles in the way of compiling accurate data is the fact that taking one's life is a criminal offence in this country. The authors of the above-mentioned report have rightly recommended that Section 325 of the PPC that criminalises suicide be abolished. That is the compassionate and forward-thinking approach required to address the problem. Mental illness, the primary underlying cause for suicide, calls for counselling and treatment. Also consider that attempted suicides greatly outnumber completed suicides. Those who survive are deserving of psychological intervention that may forestall another attempt; indeed, a prior attempt at taking one's life is the single most important risk factor for suicide. The stress of a criminal prosecution is the last thing such individuals must be subjected to.

Education disruption

FOR over a year now, the education sector has been particularly hard hit all across the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic. All learners, from grade scholars to those

studying in higher education institutions, have been affected, with education systems in both developing states as well as less-developed nations feeling the effects in varying degrees. And while high-income states have been able to cope to some extent, countries with limited resources such as ours — where the public education system is already in a fragile condition — have faced major challenges in meeting educational goals during the pandemic. As per Unesco, half the world's students are still affected by partial or full school closures, while “over 100m additional children will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading as a result of the health crisis”. Schools in Pakistan have mostly remained closed during the pandemic, opening for short periods when cases have dipped but closing again when numbers rose. On Monday, the Sindh government announced that schools could reopen on the 30th of this month if they ensured 100pc vaccination of staff, as well as 50pc attendance of students. On the same day, school owners and staffers held protests in various Sindh cities and towns calling for all educational institutions to be reopened.

Balancing the need for educating Pakistan's children while ensuring their health and that of school staffers is indeed a tough call. While college and university students can cope better with online lessons, younger learners find it more difficult. Also, there are issues of access, as low-income households cannot afford reliable high-speed internet and tablets, smartphones etc to enable online learning. Therefore, educational authorities across Pakistan must ensure that all school staff have been vaccinated so that school can reopen with strict SOPs in place. Meanwhile, the pandemic also offers an opportunity to rethink the education system in Pakistan. With the help of technology and greater access, education can be brought to more children, specifically those millions that remain out of classrooms.

Another FBR chief

THE FBR has a new chairman, the sixth one picked by Prime Minister Imran Khan in the three years of his rule. The top tax collecting agency's poor performance is at the heart of the country's chronic fiscal troubles. Former chairman Asim Ahmed's slack response to the recent cyberattacks on taxpayers' data is said to

be the main reason for his removal. Along with him, the PM's aide Waqar Masood has also been shown the door because he was unable to keep up with Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin's tax reforms agenda.

This is not the first time Mr Khan has abruptly changed his economic management team. A few months back, he had unceremoniously fired his finance minister Hafeez Sheikh and brought in Hammad Azhar, who lasted only a few days. Then Mr Tarin was drafted in to manage the nation's tenuous finances. Asad Umar, the premier's first choice as finance minister, was dismissed in a similar manner to Mr Sheikh, bowing out before he could sign the agreement with IMF and present his first full budget. The bureaucratic reshuffles in the government's economic management team have been even more frequent.

The shake-ups in the economic team signify two important crises facing the government from day one. At one level these frequent, overnight changes are a sign of the PTI leadership's indecisiveness as to which direction the economy should take. If Mr Umar lost his job while struggling to balance the IMF's economic stabilisation demands with his growth strategy as indicated in the two finance bills he had introduced in parliament, his successor was punished for doing what he was brought in to do — that is, implement the IMF's harsh economic stabilisation policies. Now Mr Tarin has been tasked with rapidly growing the economy, overturning his predecessor's policies, ahead of the 2023 elections. How long he will last is anyone's guess.

At another level, the reshuffles point to poor governance by the top decision-makers at the political level. For example, the ongoing changes in the FBR indicate the government's desperation to restructure the Board in order to mobilise the resources to finance the affairs of the state. But it does not know how to reform the corrupt and incompetent tax machinery. Shabbar Zaidi, inducted from the private sector to lead and oversee the 'transformation' of the country's inefficient tax administration, had to quit in frustration over resistance from within the FBR because he did not receive enough political support for his tax reforms agenda.

With every FBR chairman brought in "with immediate effect and until further orders", they cannot be expected to implement actions that would unleash strong opposition from within and without the organisation. And when people are inducted into the top slot because of their 'services' in hounding the government's opponents, it is foolish to expect them to deliver on the reforms agenda.

Absurd statement

THE PPP's stance that devolution of powers is not Karachi's number one problem is rather problematic. In fact, ask any resident of this city and they will tell you that along with law and order, a workable local government system for this metropolis — addressing sanitation, water, sewerage issues, etc — is their top civic concern. The PPP's logic is, therefore, strange. While meeting members of the election commission in Islamabad on Monday, Sindh government officials said local bodies elections in the province could not be held until controversies over the 2017 census are settled. Moreover while speaking in Karachi on Tuesday, PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari said that he believed "there are so many other problems for the people of Karachi and devolution of powers is not the number one priority... ." Interestingly, speaking on the same day at a separate function, the city's administrator Murtaza Wahab, a PPP man, said garbage disposal and better water supply were his top priorities. Mr Wahab must know that it was his party's government that has ensured both these key sectors remain with the provincial government, and not with the KMC; thus perhaps he should raise these issues internally with the PPP bosses. Moreover, it is quite surprising that a party that champions the 18th Amendment and protection of provincial autonomy — and rightly so — has the gall to say that empowering the third tier of the nation's biggest city is not a priority.

Such attitudes prove right the widely held notion that most political parties across Pakistan — out of narrow self-interest — do not seek an empowered third tier for fear of losing influence and patronage networks. Interestingly, while LB polls in Sindh's cantonments are due next month, local elections for its cities and towns seem to be in limbo indefinitely. The PPP's take that local polls can only be held after the census controversy is settled is akin to kicking the elections' issue into the long grass. While there are legitimate questions about the last head count, waiting for a positive settlement to this controversy to hold polls seems like a delaying tactic. The fact is that an elected, empowered local government, with the councillors and even the mayor having to answer at the mohalla level, is what the metropolis direly needs, not unelected bureaucrats and partymen who do not have to answer to the voters, running the show. The quicker this system is put in place, the better.

A question of faith

THE troubling issue of forced conversions continues to be viewed largely through a majoritarian lens. Such an approach will further demoralise and alienate non-Muslims in the country and lead Pakistan further adrift from its international obligations. On Monday, the Ministry of Religious Affairs held a meeting with several clerics and religious scholars to discuss the draft of a bill, prepared by the human rights ministry, to prohibit forced conversion. No non-Muslims were invited to participate, not even from the National Commission for Minorities; its sole Muslim member was included in the capacity of a local cleric. Non-Muslims are the primary stakeholders in this issue which has deeply personal ramifications for them: was it not critical to obtain their point of view in discussing it? By this exclusionary approach, members of the majority faith have been enabled to record their objections to the bill unchallenged and set down the parameters of the discourse.

While the discussion at the in-camera meeting has not been made public, the participants reportedly expressed strong reservations to several clauses of the draft, including the minimum age of conversion. The religious lobby's opposition to the latter point in particular has twice derailed the Sindh government's attempts to prohibit forced conversions. Non-Muslims, particularly Hindus in Sindh, have time and again protested against minor girls from their communities being abducted, forcibly converted and married to Muslim men. It is thus unsurprising that the religious lobby is so strenuously opposed to a minimum age for conversion, especially since the courts unfortunately often overlook underage marriages when the child brides are new converts. However, changing one's faith is a serious decision with life-changing consequences. It must be taken after much deliberation and with informed consent. Aside from stipulating a minimum age of 18, the draft bill contains sensible clauses that prevent rushed decisions; it also mandates severe punishment for those perpetrating forced conversions. It is time the government and society did right by the beleaguered minority communities that call Pakistan home.

PM's remarks on education

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan may have his heart in the right place where education is concerned, but his views on what is wrong with Pakistan's education system and how to set it right, lack nuance and understanding. Indeed, so black and white are some of his opinions on the subject that they could create further divisions in an already divided polity.

On Wednesday, while addressing the Punjab Education Convention 2021 in Lahore, the premier praised the provincial government for "doing what no other province is doing". That was a reference to the Single National Curriculum which Punjab has been the first to introduce in the madressahs and from grades one to five in the public and private schools within its jurisdiction. He then proceeded to strongly criticise the English-medium education system, saying it had "evolved in such a way that there was less emphasis on education and more emphasis on creating desi vilayati [local foreigners]. The attitudes and mental slavery of another culture were absorbed". The focus of this system, he contended, was elsewhere rather than on developing the nation.

That is a sweeping statement, to put it mildly, with a blatantly populist slant. It unfairly disparages students of English-medium schools, many of whom are as invested in building this nation as are those from other systems of education. In fact, the premier may want to consider that barring a couple of exceptions, his entire cabinet is a product of English-medium education. Many expatriates that he considers Pakistan's "biggest untapped asset", and whom he has asked to participate in the nation's development by investing in major infrastructure projects, also emerged from this system before settling overseas.

Certainly, the prime minister is correct when he says the education sector has been sorely neglected. In this connection, the PTI government from the outset underscored four priority areas: putting all out-of-school children into school, improving the quality of pedagogy, introducing a uniform curriculum, and boosting technical and vocational education. Of these, it has only made progress in designing an SNC, most likely because the other areas require a massive infusion of funds for building more schools, investing in teacher training, etc.

But in projecting this curriculum as a major step towards ending Pakistan's 'educational apartheid', the government is completely off course. Indeed, the SNC, by requiring math and science to be taught to all students in English from the point these subjects are introduced in school, may well exacerbate this 'educational apartheid'. Quality of education and access to it are the foundational issues that

must be tackled. Consider that most parents, even when they can scarcely afford it, prefer to send their children to private schools because learning outcomes even in low- and medium-fee paying private schools are far better than in public schools. The SNC is not even a partial solution. It may even have deleterious consequences.

Order ‘recalled’

A five-member bench of the Supreme Court has ‘recalled’ the order of a two-member bench that had taken up a petition highlighting the harassment and intimidation of journalists, and placed the petition in front of the chief justice for consideration. The short order by the bench has also stated that suo moto powers can only be exercised by the chief justice in his discretion or if recommended or requested by a bench of the court.

The court has done well to state categorically that no other honourable judge or a bench can exercise this power. This may help keep the use of suo moto under check but the fact remains that chief justices in the past have used their discretion to pick and choose cases that have often come to dominate proceedings of the court. It is therefore important that chief justices use the suo moto powers sparingly, and only when the issue has no other way of being addressed by the court through a regular process. In this particular case, the petition addressing the harassment of journalists by state agencies amounts to a genuine case for judicial intervention. It is no secret that the media has been under tremendous pressure during the last few years. Media organisations as well as individual journalists that have been critical of government policies have had to face adverse circumstances. The latest government move to throttle freedom of expression through the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority is another regressive step that is reinforcing the perception that the government wants to keep the media under tight control. It is therefore hoped that the chief justice will take up the petition and demand answers from official agencies and other governmental stakeholders. The judges in their remarks in court were supportive of the role of the media and reiterated that genuine concerns of journalists would be addressed. These are welcome words and should bring greater attention and focus on the issues highlighted in the petition.

At the same time, the media should also pay greater attention to internal weaknesses plaguing the industry that have an adverse impact on the quality of journalism. The Supreme Court can ensure greater freedom of expression for the media but it cannot help improve the standards of journalism. It is easy for media organisations to point the finger in every direction except towards themselves. Greater introspection would do media owners and managers a world of good.

Ignoring the shelterless

IN June this year, hundreds of people protested against Bahria Town Karachi — one of the largest gated housing schemes in the country. This took place on the heels of another protest by residents of ‘irregular’ low-income settlements situated on either side of Gujjar and Orangi nullahs. The protesters in both instances had a common grievance: they had been deprived of their land and homes by decisions and actions taken by the government. This has become a discernible pattern. On the one hand, the state enables the construction on dubious legal grounds of residential schemes catering to the upper and middle classes, while on the other it subjects the poor and powerless to ruthless evictions. The priority, it seems, is to cater to the rich rather than serve the common man.

The same was observed by Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah on Wednesday while hearing a petition challenging the Capital Development Authority’s ongoing anti-encroachment drive in Islamabad’s katchi abadis to recover state land. He criticised the overall development model of the federal government, commenting that “elite-centric” development policies were the worst form of violation of constitutionally guaranteed rights. “Such state policies result in inequitable distribution of state assets which forms the root cause of poverty, hunger, homelessness and most of the other vices that beset humanity,” he said. Justice Minallah nevertheless allowed the CDA to carry on with the operation as it was taking place in accordance with the law. The judgement notwithstanding, the chief justice’s scathing criticism is not out of place. It is one thing to be unable to provide shelter for the homeless due to lack of resources. However, it is absolutely criminal to collude with real estate magnates in bending the law. Several upmarket residential schemes built on encroached or reclaimed land are a case in point. No one appears to be razing these establishments to the ground. The state must correct its self-serving ways and start thinking about the poor of this country.

Disappearing ecosystems

AFTER the UN sounded “code red for humanity” with the launch of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report earlier this month, research has emerged indicating more of the same and revealing further details of the shocking extent of damage caused to the delicate balance of nature. US-based scientists have published the findings of their research in the Nature Scientific Reports, declaring that if carbon emissions continued to be released into the atmosphere at the same rate, it would annihilate up to 95pc of the earth’s ocean surface by 2100. This means that over 70pc of the earth’s surface, which is covered with water, would undergo permanent damaging changes in less than 80 years. The surface climate of oceans would be destroyed with the absorption of a poisonous concentration of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. That would irreparably change the water acidity levels, surface water temperature and concentration of the mineral aragonite (used by many marine animals to form shells and bone). According to the article, the seas have already absorbed up to a third of the world’s carbon emissions since the Industrial Revolution. However, the accelerated pace with which CO₂ was still being released into the atmosphere would mean a death sentence for most of the species that live on the surface of oceans. A living example of these alarming findings is Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, where rising sea temperatures have bleached and destroyed more than half the wondrous corals since 1995. The Great Barrier Reef stretches over 2,300 kilometres and has been a World Heritage Site since 1981 due to its scientific importance.

The UN’s IPCC report also contained similar dire warnings, and urged immediate collective action to arrest the accelerated pace of global warming and keep catastrophic climate events at bay. The unprecedented and large-scale forest fires that recently wreaked havoc in a number of European and Mediterranean regions are an example of what calamities lie ahead. The world needs to wake up and change its ruinous ways.

Unjustified perks

WHEN an aide to the prime minister introduced in the Senate a bill in March last year seeking to extend the free business-class domestic air travel facility for the

parliamentarians to their families — spouses, children and one additional person — he immediately drew support from across the political divide. The Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Revenue was quick to unanimously approve the bill in June 2020 that would entitle the lawmakers' families to avail 25 air tickets in addition to Rs300,000 travel vouchers a year. The Senators defended their decision, saying 'all parliamentarians are not rich', the changes were merely procedural and the extension of the facility to their family members would not place any additional financial burden on the public exchequer. That was a blatantly incorrect statement since the amendment would have allowed the legislators to get paid an allowance equivalent to their annual entitled value of the facility. Besides, the lawmakers and their families could fly any domestic route using this expensive facility, which was originally meant to facilitate only the members of the parliament travel from the airport closest to their constituencies to Islamabad and back.

The amendment practically made the facility a part of the salary of the parliamentarians. To his credit, PTI minister Hammad Azhar was perhaps the only one who opposed the bill, pointing out that the perk was meant to facilitate the lawmakers' travel to attend the proceedings of parliament and could not be extended to their families. The Senate committee approval for the bill came at a time when people in the country were fighting for their lives and jobs amidst the coronavirus outbreak, which had brought the economy to a standstill and thrown millions out of work. Apparently, the government had also realised by then that it was not a good time to push the bill through because it could attract public outrage. Now it has transpired that the bill is being or has already been withdrawn: not because its movers thought it was a wrong step but because the government is said to have stealthily granted the wishes of the lawmakers by making their demands a part of its budget for the present fiscal year. That people were kept in the dark about it is reprehensible and the government owes an explanation to the taxpayers as to why should they also pay the parliamentarians to support their families' lifestyle.

Kabul massacre

WHILE Kabul may have fallen to the Afghan Taliban with little violence, Thursday's devastating suicide blast outside the Afghan capital's airport serves as a harbinger of what lies ahead should the local chapter of the self-styled Islamic State group have the freedom to operate in a security vacuum.

The IS's Khorasan affiliate has claimed credit for the atrocity, which targeted families waiting outside the airport to be processed in order to leave Afghanistan. At the time of writing the death toll was at least 100, including over a dozen American troops, Taliban fighters and non-combatants. There had been intelligence reports of an impending attack, while the mass exodus to flee Taliban-ruled Afghanistan amidst the hasty Western withdrawal meant that a disaster was only a matter of time. IS was waiting to exploit the situation, and it has done so in a most brutal way.

However, gruesome as the airport bombing was, it offers an opportunity for all Afghan forces to disregard their differences and join forces — aided by the international community — against the IS threat. The world has seen in Iraq and Syria the brutal violence the self-styled caliphate is capable of. The threat of IS in Afghanistan has also been highlighted in these columns previously. Therefore, ignoring the threat will help create a regional security nightmare.

While the Taliban control most of Afghanistan, those opposed to their rule, primarily in the Panjshir area, have vowed to stick to their guns. In the interest of security, the Taliban and Panjshiri forces must work together to eliminate the IS threat from Afghan soil.

In reaction to the bombing, US President Biden has said he will strike back at IS. But instead of indulging in any gung-ho operations, there should be a unified anti-IS effort in Afghanistan led by the Taliban and other Afghan groups, and aided by foreign forces including Nato as well as Russia and China. Afghans know their country best and it should be left to them to purge it of IS.

However, such an operation does come with risks. After all, the more hard-line members of the Taliban may break ranks with the group's leadership and join forces with IS, as was the case during the Taliban-US negotiations. Be that as it may, leaving IS to its devices in Afghanistan will help create a new monster. Not only will a rejuvenated IS rampage across Afghanistan, it will pose a grave threat to all major regional states, including Pakistan. Again, mention must be made of Syria and Iraq, where foreign interference and collapse of governance gave the soldiers of the 'caliphate' an open playing field. The effects of this folly were felt in the West also, as acts of terrorism increased globally. Therefore, mistakes of the past must not be repeated in Afghanistan, and Afghan forces must lead an internationally supported effort to disable IS in the country.

Covid milestone

LAST week, we crossed a milestone in Covid-19 vaccinations, with 50m doses administered since the vaccines arrived in Pakistan. This is commendable, but still falls far short of Pakistan's target. The government has said the vaccination target is 70m people, which means 140m doses. The challenge to vaccinate the remainder persists. At present, only about 15m citizens are fully vaccinated. The authorities must continue to ensure successful and proactive vaccine procurement, build vaccine awareness and effectively administer the doses. Even after this target is reached, it appears the challenge will remain as booster shots are being considered and even rolled out in many developed countries. The data regarding some vaccines shows a drop in efficacy after six months, which means even those who have been vaccinated twice may become vulnerable to the virus and fall ill. As vaccinations continue, the authorities also need to be mindful of the rising number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in the country. Lately, we have seen a worrying number of daily deaths, — with one day marking 140 fatalities. Despite 50m administered doses, the national positivity rate is still over 6pc, with a double-digit positivity rate in some cities.

This data shows that, despite ongoing vaccinations, Pakistan is far from out of the woods. Making vaccination mandatory for travel, work and public gatherings is one way of ensuring an uptick in numbers, but it still leaves out many citizens who have not registered themselves. Moreover, the thousands of refugees expected from Afghanistan, too, will need to be registered and vaccinated. It is commendable that experts are trying to raise awareness about Covid-19 vaccines, especially among pregnant women who are reluctant to get the jab. Officials considering steps to penalise unvaccinated citizens is an extreme measure, but nevertheless it is a necessary one in the fight against Covid-19. The rate of vaccinations must continue to increase. It has taken about six months to reach the 50m milestone. The government should target the next 50m and administer vaccines in a shorter span.

Economy uplift

ON the face of it at least, the new short- to long-term plan announced by Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin for the development of 14 key sectors of the economy

including agriculture, construction, tourism, IT and micro and small enterprises for putting the country back on the road to inclusive and sustainable economic growth lacks what it boasts: a planning-based strategy.

From the details published in newspapers, the plan seems to be a collection of certain targets that the government wants to achieve in the next two to three years ahead of the next general elections. How? Although Mr Tarin claimed that the achievement of these targets would 'set the stage for long-term inclusive, sustainable growth and rid us of the boom-and-bust cycles', he did not elaborate on the road map he has developed for realising the goal.

For starters, the strategy seeks to boost economic growth to 6pc in the medium term without putting pressure on the country's balance of payments, and by keeping inflationary expectations subdued. But it does not elaborate on how it plans to do so. The current account deficit is already billed to breach the central bank's estimates of 2pc-3pc of GDP this year as imports are set to surge further to support the nascent economic recovery of recent months. Resultantly, the currency is already under pressure with the rupee weakening from 152.28 a dollar in May to around 166, fuelling inflation. Then, it seeks to double the current investment-to-GDP ratio to 24pc. That is a tall order. Although negative interest rates and the availability of cheap long-term financing has encouraged investors to invest in capacity expansion and new projects in the last one year, the trend may reverse as soon as the State Bank ditches its accommodating monetary policy stance to focus on price stabilisation. Likewise, the plans to increase tax collection by 1.5pc-2pc of GDP a year and boost annual exports to \$40bn-50bn — even though doable — appear ambitious at this time.

Pakistan is at a critical juncture. The economic slowdown induced by IMF-mandated stabilisation policies and Covid-19 have left deep scars on the economy and the people. There is no doubt that the economy is turning the corner. Yet the recovery is fragile at best, with uncertainties — such as the potential insecurity spillover from Afghanistan, currency volatility, inflation, current account deficit and uncertain ties with the IMF — putting pressure on the business environment. It would be silly to expect piecemeal policies to tackle the issues and uncertainties facing the economy and people today. Instead of coming up with half-cooked strategies every few years, Pakistan's political leadership and policymakers should focus on a comprehensive economic framework with short- to long-term targets for addressing structural problems in the economy as well as formulate policies to

build the resilience of private businesses to enable them survive without the government's assistance.

Undue favours?

THE system of checks and balances in a functioning democracy can suffer grievous harm when any of its components is seen as being the recipient of undue favours. That is even more so in the case of the judiciary, whose credibility and respect rests upon its perceived independence. On Wednesday, the Islamabad High Court passed an important order in this context when it declared that the policy of allotting more than one plot to judges of the superior judiciary and top bureaucrats was illegal. Justice Kayani in his order, however, referred the matter to the government to develop a policy in this regard "in clear non-discriminatory manner so that confidence of citizens of Pakistan is restored upon the entire system of governance". The court was hearing the petitions of an NGO challenging government decisions of 2006 and 2008 of allotting additional plots to bureaucrats and judges of the superior judiciary. It said that "the policy ... is with mala fide intentions and under extraneous consideration to give loss to public exchequer".

It is well known that land worth billions of rupees is parcelled out to influential members of society every year. Many however point to the injustice of such a system in which individuals who have well-remunerated jobs with many perks and privileges, or have retired from such positions, feel entitled to such largesse in a poor nation like Pakistan. In October 2020, Justice Qazi Faez Isa had made some insightful observations on this issue when he was part of a Supreme Court bench adjudicating on a matter concerning a housing project in Islamabad. Although the verdict declared that the land had been legally acquired, which was the point in question, Justice Isa in an additional note said: "The Constitution and the law ... do not entitle chief justices and judges of the superior courts to plots of land. ... The aphorism that, justice must not only be done but be seen to be done, is undermined if people perceive that cases are not decided without fear or favour. The executive giving plots to judges constitutes a favour." Further, he pointed out that during 2020-2021, the amount to be spent on pensions would come to Rs470bn, including Rs111bn for retired civilians and Rs359bn for retired armed forces personnel. "To serve the nation is a singular honour. When in addition to receiving pensions, public lands are taken, it is eminently unfair." It is a sound argument.

Unclear PDM goals

THE opposition alliance PDM woke up from its deep slumber and held a well-attended rally in Karachi, its first big event after months. The speeches by the most important leaders, Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz Sharif and Maulana Fazlur Rehman, echoed their traditional positions and did not break any new ground in terms of fresh thinking. Public rallies however have limited value in today's hyper-connected world. Once seen as a barometer of a party's popularity, these rallies have now come to demonstrate less national popularity and more the organisational capability of the party. With JUI-F's cadres forming the backbone of the Karachi jalsa on Sunday, there was little doubt that it would have the numbers that make for good optics. But optics are not the solution to the alliance's problems.

With the departure of the PPP from its ranks, the PDM is now hobbling along as a PML-N and JUI-F project. To make matters worse, it does not seem to have a well-defined agenda. At its launch in September 2020, the alliance was clear that it aimed to bring down the PTI government. Its plan to do so was also fairly clear. A public mobilisation campaign was to be followed by a long march to Islamabad which would ultimately lead to mass resignations from the assemblies to bring the system crashing down. Once this grand plan collapsed under the weight of disagreements between the PPP and the other two big parties, the movement was as good as done. Now it wants to charge itself up again. But to do what? And how? Some PDM leaders are now saying they are looking to convert their alliance into an electoral one. That may be well and good, but given the parliamentary strength of its member parties, other than PML-N and JUI-F, the idea does not inspire much excitement. With no real options to bring down the PTI government, and not much consensus with the PPP on an in-house change, it appears the opposition has reconciled itself to the fact that the PTI government will have little problem completing its five-year term. The PDM therefore really needs to take thorough stock of where its politics has brought it and what it wants to achieve in the time between now and the next general elections.

If the leaders of the alliance conduct an honest assessment of the situation, they would not have a problem reaching the conclusion that Prime Minister Imran Khan is now in a fairly comfortable position to govern for the next two years without worrying about a threat from the opposition. In fact, he is now consolidating his position for the next polls with a clear agenda that aims at showcasing key projects

while remaining on the same page with the establishment. The PDM might want to inject some clarity into its plans.

US drone strikes

THE American unilateral drone strikes on what it says are militants of the self-styled Islamic State group active in Afghanistan are deeply problematic. For one, they violate the sovereignty of a country that the US has basically washed its hands of. Second, it demonstrates Washington's imperial overreach that has yet again caused unacceptable collateral damage. The US acted in response to the bloody suicide bombing outside Kabul airport last week, in which nearly 175 people were killed, including over a dozen American soldiers. However, instead of America acting on its own, the anti-IS effort should be spearheaded by the Afghans, supported by regional and international powers.

Over the weekend, the US struck a 'planner' of the IS in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, while this operation was followed up by another American drone strike in Kabul on Sunday. The second incident has particularly raised controversy, as eyewitnesses claim civilians — including children — were hit, not IS terrorists. While the US military says it has launched investigations, the Afghan Taliban have condemned the "arbitrary attack that has resulted in civilian casualties".

Indeed, Afghanistan cannot be abandoned so that IS and those of their ilk can take advantage of the chaos and vacuum in governance and spill more innocent blood. However, the key question is how to calibrate a proper response. Unfortunately, the US tends to consider itself above the international rules-based order, often flexing its considerable military muscle while ignoring the sovereignty of independent states. Instead of reducing terrorism, this approach has only resulted in greater chaos, as witnessed in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan. As this paper has argued, the anti-IS effort in Afghanistan should be led by Afghan forces — the Taliban as well as their political opponents — aided by regional states as well as international powers.

Without doubt, Afghans know their country best, and if local intelligence and foreign firepower are combined, the IS threat can be eliminated. However, should the US choose to play lone ranger, things will get more complicated. Firstly, unilateral strikes may result in further civilian casualties, and there will be no one

to independently verify if indeed terrorists have been taken out, or if non-combatants have also been hit. Secondly, the sooner an inclusive set-up takes power in Kabul the better; this dispensation should lead efforts against IS and other terrorist outfits, and be aided by the international community for the safety of Afghanistan, and the region.

Climate change concerns

WITH the effects of climate change unfolding everywhere, it is a pity that the collective sense of purpose needed to tackle the threat remains absent. The immense havoc wreaked by the activities of man — especially industrialisation — are in evidence in the changing weather patterns and frequent extreme events that often leave tragedy in their wake. It was encouraging, therefore, to note that last week, Pakistan joined 187 countries in marking the Stockholm International Water Institute's World Water Week. In Punjab, the heart of agricultural activities, amongst the more publicised of related events was a tree plantation drive in the Sheikhpura region, organised by the WWF-Pakistan and the provincial irrigation department. Here, it was noted yet again that Pakistan is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change even though it is not a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions. This point cannot be overemphasised with the global realities before us as well as the fact that the country has an economy that is heavily based on agriculture.

This particular effort may have been organised by an international forum, but the PTI government must be given due credit for having consistently made the protection of the environment a priority. The issue is one over which the world has no choice but to come together, regardless of the part that individual countries may have played in bringing us to this pass. As a nation that is still developing, Pakistan in particular faces the double jeopardy of diminishing food-growing capacity (due in part to rapid urbanisation) coupled with a high rate of population growth. With a fairly long 'to-do' list on the state's agenda, it is vital that development and regeneration activities be tightly targeted and balanced, and that resources be used wisely. The planting of trees is essential to ensure a reliable supply of freshwater and mitigate the effects of climate change, as is selecting the right species so that groundwater levels do not deplete. The resources being steered by the state should include greater research.